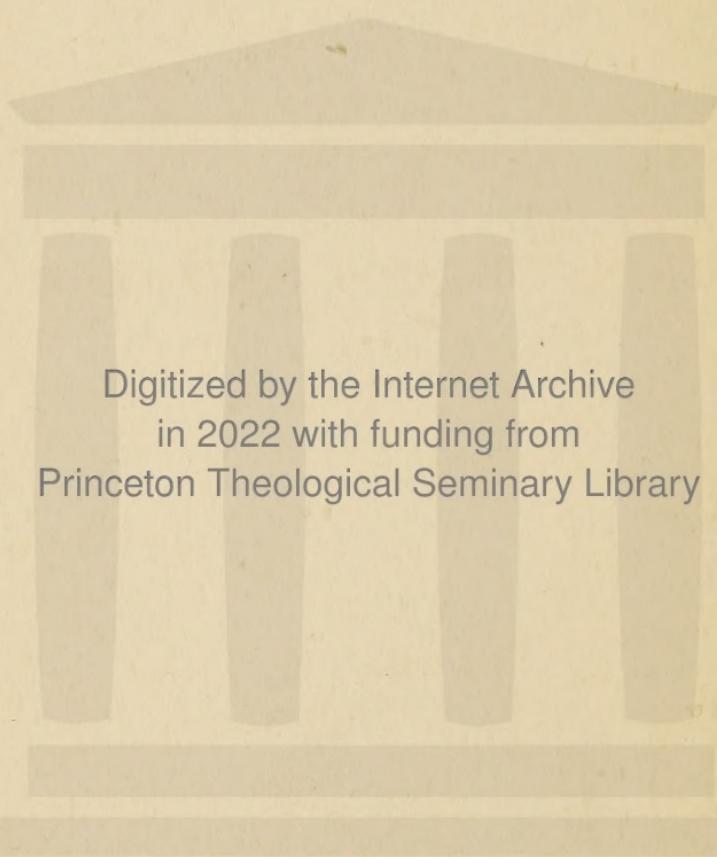


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# **VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR**

Then said the Interpreter to Christian, Hast thou  
considered all these things ?

*Chr.* Yes, and they put me in hope and fear.

BUNYAN.

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# VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

A STUDY OF  
THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION  
AND ITS MESSAGE FOR TO-DAY

BY

GEORGE W. THORN

AUTHOR OF  
"THE PROPHETS OF ISRAEL AND THEIR MESSAGE FOR TO-DAY"



NEW YORK  
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**VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR**

— EC —

**PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

MY FATHER  
IN MEMORY OF  
MY MOTHER  
AND TWO BROTHERS

" His servants shall do him service; and they shall see his face; and his name shall be on their foreheads."

REV. xxii. 3 and 4.



## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
PREFACE . . . . .	ix
1. THE BOOK OF A CHRISTIAN PROPHET . . . . .	I
2. THE GREAT CONFLICT . . . . .	13
3. THE LORD OF LIFE AND HISTORY (Rev. i.) . . .	24
4. THE MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (Rev. ii., iii.)	33
5. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CREATIVE POWER AND REDEMPITIVE LOVE (Rev. iv., v.) . . . . .	44
6. THE BREAKING OF THE SEALS (Rev. vi.) . . . .	52
7. TRIUMPHANT HOSTS (Rev. vii.) . . . . .	61
8. THE SOUNDING OF THE TRUMPETS (Rev. viii., ix.)	67
9. RENEWED INSPIRATION AND ASSURANCE (Rev. x., xi.)	77
10. THE DRAGON, THE WOMAN AND THE CHILD (Rev. xii.)	84
11. THE TWO BEASTS (Rev. xiii.) . . . . .	92
12. ANTICIPATIONS OF THE END (Rev. xiv.) . . . .	104
13. THE OUTPOURING OF THE BOWLS (Rev. xv., xvi.) .	114
14. THE JUDGMENT OF THE SCARLET WOMAN (Rev. xvii., xviii.) . . . . .	122

# VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

CHAPTER	PAGE
15. THE JUDGMENT OF THE BEASTS AND THE DRAGON AND THE LAST JUDGMENT (Rev. xix., xx.) . . . . .	133
16. THE GREAT CONSUMMATION (Rev. xxi.-xxii. 5) . . . . .	144
17. THE EPILOGUE (Rev. xxii. 6-21) . . . . .	156
APPENDIX. A NOTE ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE BOOK . . . . .	163
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	170
INDEX . . . . .	171

## PREFACE

A GREAT host of expositors have undertaken to interpret the Book of the Revelation and to point out its message for their own time. Many of them, however, have failed to realize the fundamental condition of their task. The message of this book can only be discovered when the study of it is based upon the frankest recognition of the fact that it was written with the purpose of helping and encouraging certain Christian men and women living in the Roman Province of Asia towards the close of the first century of our era. The expositor must therefore seek to reconstruct the situation in which these people were placed, to show what was the nature of their difficulties and trials and to set forth the meaning the language and imagery of the book would suggest to their minds. Only when that has been done can he hope to point out the great spiritual truths the book proclaims and their bearing upon the conditions of life to-day.

In following this method the present writer is profoundly indebted to the work of modern scholars who have done so much to enlarge our knowledge of

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

the conditions of religious and social life in Asia Minor during the period to which the book belongs, and also to those who by their researches in the realm of Jewish apocalyptic literature have shed so much light on the imagery the book contains and the ideas it reflects. He feels, however, that sometimes these studies have too great an influence upon the expositions which are offered of particular passages, not enough allowance being made for the fact that the writer is a mystic with genuine visionary experiences which he seeks to relate and to interpret. Perhaps a wholly satisfactory exposition of this book cannot be expected until much greater progress has been made in the psychological study of the mystic phenomena of the religious consciousness, and the result of that progress is combined with the knowledge that is the fruit of literary and historical research. But without waiting for that, it may at least be recognized that some of the difficulties which are credited to unskilful handling of literary sources, either by the writer himself or by a later editor, may find more satisfactory explanation in the inconsequence and incongruity which we know to be characteristic of dreams and visions. Of this point of view the following exposition will furnish illustrations.

## PREFACE

This exposition is intended for those who desire to know something of what may be claimed, in the light of modern scholarship, as to the abiding spiritual worth of the most perplexing part of the New Testament, but who have not the time or opportunity for close and detailed study. That many alternative interpretations of particular passages have been passed by, in the interests of condensation and lucidity, must not be taken as indicating that the writer considers them as unimportant or unworthy of notice. Those who desire completer discussion of the many problems a study of the Book of the Revelation raises must be referred to larger works, such as some of those included in the Bibliography at the end of this book.



# Visions of Hope and Fear

## CHAPTER I

### THE BOOK OF A CHRISTIAN PROPHET

"No form of early Christian literature answers so well as the Apocalyptic to the Baconian definition of the service rendered by genuine poetry in raising and erecting the mind above the tyranny of mere appearances. Emphatically the Apocalypse aims at 'submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind.' It reads history under the light of faith and hope ; it floods the evil present with transcendent anticipations ; it reasserts the supremacy of the ideal and of the Spirit, against depressing memories and forebodings. It is a pictorial expansion of the Christian principle : we walk by faith, not by sight."—Dr J. MOFFATT.

THE Jews took the opening word, or words, of the first five books of the Bible as their titles and Christians have done the same thing in the case of the last book. The first word of the book in Greek is *Apocalypse* ; changed into Latin dress it becomes *Revelation* ; the simple English for it is *Uncovering*. In its original Greek form the word has now been appropriated as a technical description of a number of works which emanated from Jewish and Christian sources during the two centuries preceding Christ and the two which followed. These books had a far-reaching influence and they are of considerable

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

importance for the study of the New Testament—especially for our present subject. We must not, however, suppose that such a classification of this literature existed in New Testament times. John<sup>1</sup> did not sit down with the intention of composing a certain kind of book known to his contemporaries as an “apocalypse.” He repeatedly refers to what he is writing as *prophecy*, and to himself as a member of the order of Christian Prophets. If the book had come down to us without any traditional title we might call it, after Old Testament analogy :

*The Book of the Prophet John.*

Or, abbreviating the introductory paragraph, and setting it out like the title of a modern book, we might print it thus :

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST  
A PROPHECY  
by  
JOHN.

To understand the significance of such a title and the standpoint from which this book is written, it is necessary that we should realize the important place and wide influence of the Prophet in the early Christian Church. Preaching on the Day of Pentecost, Peter explained the great experience which had come to the disciples as a fulfilment of Joel’s

<sup>1</sup> There is no need to ask who John was at this point. That question can best be discussed after reading the book, and is therefore left to the end.

## THE BOOK OF A CHRISTIAN PROPHET

words: "I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. . . . Yea, and on my servants and on my handmaidens in those days will I pour forth of my Spirit and they shall prophesy."<sup>1</sup> Jewish Christians were not slow to recognize the worth of that gift. It is true that, at first, their attention was largely taken by the strange "gift of tongues," but they soon realized the superior value of prophecy, not only as a renewal of the privilege and endowment which had meant so much to Israel in the golden age of her faith, but also as a splendid equipment for the new task of building up Christ's Church in the world. Some of the Gentile churches, however, were slower to recognize the relative importance of these two gifts and were inclined to exalt speaking with tongues above the power of prophesying. St Paul vigorously opposed such a false estimate of spiritual values and gave convincing reasons for regarding prophecy as the supreme endowment. One who possessed the gift of tongues might utter sacred and profound mysteries, but, unless he or someone else interpreted the strange speech, no benefit could be conferred on others. But a prophet built up the whole Church with his inspired words of consolation and hope and his testimony, born of the great experience of the fullness of the Spirit, had power to convince and convert any unbeliever who might be present. So, said the Apostle, of all spiritual gifts that most to be coveted was the power of prophesying.<sup>2</sup>

This power might be bestowed upon any believer,

<sup>1</sup> Acts ii. 17 and 18.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. xiv.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

and all who received it could speak, in turn, at the meetings of the Church. Nevertheless, those who received the gift in marked degree and as a more or less permanent endowment were relatively few, and they soon came to be regarded as a distinct order in the Church, exercising a ministry second in importance only to that of the Apostles. They became the recognized Christian teachers and preachers, and as such they wielded much greater influence than local church-officers like presbyters and deacons. But this position of pre-eminence was not long maintained. The Church developed a more elaborate and a more rigid organization for its government and ministry which allowed less scope for the independent activity and personal authority of the prophet. Extravagances and excesses on the part of some who claimed the gift of prophecy tended to discredit the order, and gradually the prophet was excluded from any recognized place in the official ministry of the Church. Yet the spirit of prophecy never wholly died out and in all genuine movements of revival it can be discovered working again with something of its former commanding authority and creative power.

Of this movement of Christian prophecy, while in the full tide of its power, the Book of the Revelation is the unique literary outcome. John, as one of the prophetic order,<sup>1</sup> had exercised his ministry in the churches of Asia, delivering orally "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."<sup>2</sup> The influence of his preaching and the prominence of his position in the Church had marked him out as an

<sup>1</sup> Rev. xxii. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. i. 9.

## THE BOOK OF A CHRISTIAN PROPHET

early victim when a season of persecution commenced. He was banished to the Isle of Patmos, and there, in all probability, compelled to labour in the stone quarries as one of a gang of convicts. But the "tribulation" he endured could not quench the prophetic fire which burned in his soul. In the loneliness and weariness of his exile he gave himself to prolonged and fruitful meditation upon the truths he had learned. He thought much of the circumstances and needs of the people to whom he had been used to minister. He pondered deeply the world-happenings of his day, as report and rumour presented them to him. And, from time to time, the Spirit of God wrought so mightily within him that the conditions of earthly existence seemed to be suspended and in his ecstasy he became aware of heavenly and eternal realities.<sup>1</sup>

Mystic experiences of this kind were not unknown to others, but not always could they tell what they had heard and seen in this state of ecstasy. St Paul, for instance, had received "visions and revelations (apocalypses) of the Lord,"<sup>2</sup> but he felt that he could never express what had been revealed to him. No doubt such experiences profoundly influenced his life and thought, and probably they coloured his many references to things unseen and eternal. "Glory is a word that on his lips must have always tasted of the Third Heaven and Paradise."<sup>3</sup> But of any direct description of what he had seen and heard there is not a word; he held his experience to be incommunicable. With John,

<sup>1</sup> Rev. i. 10; iv. 2; xvii. 3; xxi. 10.      <sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. xii. 1ff.

<sup>3</sup> Roberts, *The Supreme Experience of Christianity*, p. 70.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

however, the case was different. The revelation given to him was unmistakably a divine message, and he was directed to write what he had seen in a book, and to send it, as a letter, to be read in the churches of Asia, where his sacred calling was known and his prophetic authority recognized.

But how could any immediate consciousness of spiritual realities be expressed in human language, moulded, as it necessarily is, by the experiences of the physical senses ? That was not a new problem set for the Christian seer. An ineffable element has been recognized in all profound spiritual experience, and in the travail of utterance which has resulted, the language of symbolism has been born. Some knowledge of the laws and limits of this form of speech is essential to any clear grasp of the significance of what John wrote for the churches of Asia.

For our purpose, a symbol may be defined as a representation, in a form that appeals to the senses, of a truth, or an experience, the nature of which is such that it does not admit of any direct literal description. It is not a complete expression of the truth or experience, such as can meet the challenge of a critical intellect, but it suffices to suggest the reality to a responsive spiritual imagination. The reality is always greater than the symbol which represents it ; yet the two things can no more be separated than soul and body. “A symbol is the living flesh and blood, the organic body, in which an idea must be clothed in order to manifest and realize itself.”<sup>1</sup> But while a symbol is at first the

<sup>1</sup> E. Caird, *Evolution of Religion*, Vol. I., p. 292. Caird refers to poetic symbols, but his words may be taken generally.

## THE BOOK OF A CHRISTIAN PROPHET

necessary embodiment of the truth it expresses, there is always the danger that, as time goes on, the essential truth may be lost sight of and the symbol alone cherished and reverenced. Then a spirit of logical but unimaginative and unspiritual literalism comes in and does its destructive work. What was once a noble and living faith in transcendent realities is transformed into an unintelligent superstition or a mechanical idol-worship, which becomes the butt of scoffing unbelief. One need go no further than some of the interpretations given to the book with which we are here concerned to find sad examples of the follies and futilities men can commit when they succumb to this peril.

Symbolism enters very largely into the composition of the Bible and is especially characteristic of the Hebrew prophets. This is seen, not only in their free use of poetic imagery, but also in actions they performed as visible signs of the truth they proclaimed, and in the accounts of visions they received, every detail of which is charged with spiritual significance. In later days the symbolism became more elaborate and involved until it reached its fullest development in the books already referred to, which we now class together as "apocalypses." The Jews probably knew them by the name of *apocrypha*,<sup>1</sup> i.e. hidden books, either because they regarded them as having been concealed when they were written until the time came to which their

<sup>1</sup> This original meaning of the word must not be confused with its present use as the designation of a collection of books found in the Greek version of the Old Testament but not in the Hebrew, and therefore not acknowledged by Protestants as an integral part of Scripture.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

revelations referred,<sup>1</sup> or because they were not openly published to the world, but kept for the secret use of the specially initiated. These books, of which Daniel is the great Old Testament prototype, are almost entirely made up of symbolical visions in which much of the old prophetic imagery is reshaped and adapted to new purposes. Fresh conceptions also are introduced which owe a good deal to the influence of other religions, especially those of Babylonia and Persia.

To all this wealth of symbolism John was heir. His mind was steeped in the sacred scriptures of the Old Testament and in those other writings to which reference has just been made. In addition to this he was familiar with many conceptions, current in the various religious communities of Asia, which had helped to mould the ideas of Asiatic Christians. All his thought of unseen spiritual realities was bound to be affected by these complex influences. And when, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, divine truth was revealed to him through the medium of visions, it was inevitable that imagery which had woven itself into the very texture of his mind should reappear in new combinations having fresh significance.

After the ecstatic vision came the effort to write the essential truth of what he had seen and heard. The same Spirit who had lifted him above the realm of time and sense was with him to inspire him for this task, but divine inspiration works with and through personal qualities and endowments. John had to recall what had been shown him in his

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dan. viii. 26; xii. 4, 9.

## THE BOOK OF A CHRISTIAN PROPHET

moments of ecstasy and to relate it to all the truth he had learned under more normal conditions of spiritual illumination so as to compose a single and continuous prophetic work which should convey the message with which he had been entrusted. In such an endeavour it was natural that he should make large use of the language of books which had profoundly influenced his thinking and which were familiar to many of those for whom he wrote. And if sometimes he quotes so extensively from them that the old material hardly harmonizes with the new, that need be no stumbling-block to us. The readers he had in mind would readily understand allusions and perceive connexions of ideas which we find it very difficult to trace to-day. And some lack of logical consistency and orderly development of the theme is only what we might expect from a true prophet with real visions of heavenly things to narrate. Complete harmony of detail and close adherence to the forms of literary art, in a work of this character, would suggest the conscientious but uninspired labour of the mere student and teacher.<sup>1</sup>

While, however, we refuse to regard an inspired Christian prophet as dependent for even the form of his message upon certain books with which he was familiar, we at once recognize that those books may greatly help us in understanding and interpreting what he says, and therefore we shall need to have

<sup>1</sup> "It is not a question of the fitting together of documents, of scissors and paste, but of the alternate emergence of independent convictions into consciousness and expression. In moments of crisis and emotion these convictions sometimes attain an artistic unity, held together by a feeling of passionate and unshaken loyalty to God and His Christ, but they do not attain, and cannot attain, to logical consistency."—Burkitt, *Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, p. 49.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

frequent recourse to other "apocalyptic" writings for the illumination of our present subject. But when we do so we must remember some important points of difference which mark out the Book of the Revelation from all the rest of this literature and give it its supreme value.

In the first place the authors of other apocalypses did not write in their own name as men directly charged with a divine message to their own generation. They issued their works under the names of great saints and heroes of the past, such as Enoch, Moses, Isaiah, Baruch and Ezra. They were probably induced to adopt this literary artifice by the difficulty of getting any book of a prophetic character accepted unless it was believed to have been written not later than the time of Ezra. At that period the Law came to be regarded as the absolute and final divine revelation and no place was left, therefore, for fresh, independent spokesmen for God. Besides this, the sacred collection of prophetic writings was complete by about 200 B.C. and no book of later date could claim recognition as inspired prophecy. For these reasons, Jewish writers who believed themselves to have some new truth to impart, or who considered that they were called to re-interpret and re-express some old truth, from about the year 200 B.C. to the fall of Jerusalem, were accustomed to seek wider influence for their work by associating it with the names of great religious leaders of the past. But the Book of the Revelation adopts no device of this kind. It does not deal with any history or revelation of past days. The prophet writes in view of an immediate crisis,

## THE BOOK OF A CHRISTIAN PROPHET

in the midst of which both he and his readers are living, and he claims to have a fresh message directly concerned with the needs and circumstances of the time. This characteristic note of genuine prophecy distinguishes this book from all the other apocalypses.

But there is another and profounder difference between this book and its Jewish precursors, and that is the difference which Christ has made. The Jewish apocalypses provide a programme of a coming *Day of the Lord* when all evil will be overthrown and righteousness gloriously vindicated. But the Book of the Revelation is the exultant disclosure of a Messiah already triumphant and yet bearing the marks of patient suffering by which He has conquered and is still conquering. He is the crucified, risen, ascended, glorified Christ, and in His hands is the sceptre of the universe. That fact is the clue to the maze of history, and the sufferings which Christians are called upon to endure they may bear with hope and confidence as incidents in the victorious warfare their Lord is waging against all forms of evil.

So although John, to a large extent, used the well-worn apocalyptic moulds, the metal which he poured into them was the pure gold of revealed truth, melted in the crucible of an inspired imagination. He was no literary hack, piecing together with clumsy laboriousness fragments from various books and passing off the result as an original composition. Nor was he a mystic dreamer, from whose subconsciousness things he had heard and read kept floating up, until, feeling they had some mysterious significance, he was moved to write them down, but with-

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

out the power to fuse his material into any vital unity. He was a true prophet, gifted, like his Hebrew predecessors, with spiritual insight and the foresight born of that, but endowed far beyond them by virtue of the experience he had of the living Christ. And, like the writings of those masters of Israel's faith, his book stands in immediate relationship to the circumstances and needs of his own time ; it is designed to warn, to encourage, and to save the living men and women to whom it is sent. This intimate connexion with the life of the age in which it was written distinguishes the Book of the Revelation from later Christian apocalypses, as well as from earlier ones of Jewish origin, and gives it what they cannot, in any real sense, claim, a "message for to-day." It is always a prophet who speaks most closely to the heart of his own generation whose message has most significance for other generations also. The truths that are most timely are the eternal truths.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE GREAT CONFLICT

“ If to feel, in the ink of the slough,  
And the sink of the mire,  
Veins of glory and fire  
Run through and transpierce and transpire,  
And a secret purpose of glory in every part,  
And the answering glory of battle fill my heart;  
To thrill with the joy of girded men,  
To go on for ever and fail and go on again,  
And be mauled to the earth and arise,  
And contend for the shade of a word and a thing not seen  
with the eyes :  
With the half of a broken hope for a pillow at night  
That somehow the right is the right  
And the smooth shall bloom from the rough :  
Lord, if that were enough ? ”

R. L. STEVENSON.

THOUGH the Book of the Revelation presents some striking differences from the Jewish apocalypses, as has been pointed out in the previous chapter, it is entirely in accord with them as to the kind of situation to which it is addressed. These books were all called into existence in days of darkness and adversity. They have aptly been described as “Tracts for Bad Times.” Their writers were men who felt keenly the overthrow of national hopes and ideals under the oppression of heathen conquerors, but they believed that God would shortly

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

intervene, in an altogether supernatural fashion, to fulfil His promises. "Under the influence of their national disasters, they came to regard the whole course of history as a succession of great dramatic catastrophes, and looked forward with hope to the coming of one great, final, cataclysm, after which the tyranny of the great nations would be trodden under foot, and the Children of Israel would take their place as the chosen people of God, under His direct governance, with His anointed King as His representative on earth."<sup>1</sup> It was this hope for the future, despite its sombre view of the immediate present, that gave the apocalyptic literature of Judaism its hold upon the people.

The same sense of oppression by a heathen world-power, and of a tremendous conflict impending, in which spiritual forces must gloriously triumph, dominates the Book of the Revelation. True, it is no longer the Jewish people who are the oppressed ; it is the Christian Church. But the Christian Church is regarded as the heir of all the spiritual privilege and prerogative of Israel, and the divinely given hopes and ideals on which the soul of Judaism had been fed are appropriated, quite naturally, to Christian use. In the eyes of the world the Church appears puny and contemptible. She is pursued by the bitter jealousy of the Jews ; she is scorned and hated by the pagan society which surrounds her ; she is grievously wounded and weakened by apostasies, divisions, and disloyalties within her own borders. And now she is about to suffer rigorous persecution at the hands of the

<sup>1</sup> Lake, *The Stewardship of Faith*, p. 9.

## THE GREAT CONFLICT

State. Yet the prophet views the situation without dismay. He sees the Church in the light of her divine calling and destiny. She does not lie helpless and forsaken in the relentless grip of her mighty enemy. She stands, radiant in the consciousness of God's presence, to face unflinchingly the magnificence and power of imperial Rome, and the prophet dares to speak with absolute confidence of the issue of the tremendous conflict which is about to begin.

To gain the true point of view for the interpretation of the Book of the Revelation and the appreciation of its message for to-day, it is necessary that we should understand something of the origin of the antagonism between the Church and the Roman Empire and that we should recognize the nature of the issue which fanned the smouldering fires of opposition to a blaze.

Roman religion was essentially national; it was concerned not so much with the honour of the gods as with the welfare of the State. Its observance was therefore inseparable from the duties of citizenship and patriotism. But so long as the prescribed ceremonies and sacrifices were attended to, the State did not concern itself with the private beliefs of individuals. They might disbelieve in the existence of the gods or they might adopt any of the numerous foreign religions which poured into the Empire, mostly from the East. This attitude to her own citizens made it easy for Rome to allow a very wide latitude of belief in the provinces she had won by conquest. Only in extreme cases, such as those in which human sacrifice was supposed to be

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

involved (Druidism, for instance), were native religions interfered with. Nevertheless, political considerations made it desirable that some kind of religious unity should obtain throughout the Empire, and a method was found which seemed to secure this without disturbing the multitude of polytheistic faiths.

Even while Rome was still a republic the spirit of the State had been personified and worshipped as the goddess *Roma*. A temple was erected to her in Smyrna as early as 195 B.C. This worship of the genius of the city continued under the imperial regime and was presently extended to include the Emperor as the incarnation of the power and authority of the State. Belief in the divinity of kings is found in many forms of primitive religion, especially in the East. The Greeks learned it from their contact with orientals and from them it spread to Rome. Julius Cæsar was the first to take advantage of it by definitely claiming divine honours. Statues of him were placed in all temples throughout the Empire; public prayers were ordered to be offered him every year; oaths were to be sworn by his name; and his festival, as Jupiter Julius, was to be observed every four years. Augustus, admonished perhaps by the murder of his predecessor, was more cautious. At Rome he did not permit worship to be offered to him, during his lifetime, though the Senate made him a god, by its decree, at his death. In the provinces, however, Augustus allowed temples to be erected in his honour, but required that he should be worshipped only in conjunction with the goddess *Roma*. The first city in Asia to

## THE GREAT CONFLICT

avail itself of this privilege was Pergamum,<sup>1</sup> which received the necessary authority to build in the year 29 B.C., though the temple was not dedicated until ten years later.

It was soon realized that such an institution as Emperor-worship provided a most valuable means of strengthening the unity of the Empire and securing the loyalty of the provinces. But, though the idea was applied to the whole Empire, nowhere was it developed so fully and carried out with such elaborate care as in the provinces of Asia Minor. In accordance with the general system of government which obtained throughout the Empire, these provinces each held an annual assembly of deputies from the different towns and to this assembly the arrangement of all matters connected with the worship of the Emperor was relegated. The president of this council took his title from the name of the province in which he held office. In Asia he was called the Asiarch; in Cilicia, the Ciliciarch; in Bithynia, the Bithyniarch, and so on. Gradually his civil functions lost their significance, but his religious duties became more important and far-reaching. Not only was he the head of the priesthood devoted to the worship of the Emperor in the province, but he had also powers of superintendence over religion in general. As the chief burden of the expense of the festivals and games with which the worship of the Emperor was celebrated fell upon him, he had to be a man of considerable wealth. Nevertheless, the office was greatly sought after on account of the pomp and prestige associated with it, and the title

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the reference to "Satan's throne" in Rev. ii. 13.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

was proudly worn even after the term of office had expired.<sup>1</sup>

The imperial religion flourished in the provinces far more than at the heart of the Empire. Cultivated Romans, who had little belief in any divine powers, would not be likely to accept enthusiastically the divinity of a Caligula or a Nero. The best of the Emperors they might recognize as entitled to a place "amongst the immortals," but the worship of such would be nothing more than a piece of high State ceremony, which provided spectacular expression for the sentiments of loyalty and patriotism. Some of the Emperors themselves were unwilling to accept the honours thrust upon them. Tiberius refused the petition of ambassadors from Spain, who desired to erect a temple to him and his mother. And Vespasian, during his last illness, made melancholy sport of the posthumous divinity which would be accorded to him. "Alas!" he said, "I see I shall be a god directly!" The Senate discriminated between Emperors at their death, according divine honours to some who had not claimed them during their lifetime, and refusing them to others who had.

But in the provinces, and particularly in those of Asia Minor, there was never any unwillingness to receive the new religion. The imperial power was honoured as having provided a security of government and an uprightness of administration that had long been wanting. Some of the Emperors had shown special favour to the provinces, affording them help when they greatly needed it. Even

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Acts xix. 31*: "Chief officers of Asia" = Greek, *Asiarchs*.

## THE GREAT CONFLICT

Emperors who had established a reputation for tyranny and cruelty, in their relations with Romans, generally ruled the provinces with fairness. It was natural, therefore, that provincials should regard the reigning Emperor with reverence and devotion, and from this attitude it was an easy transition to that of worship. They had no monotheistic prepossessions, and political institutions which conferred great and obvious benefits might well seem to be of heavenly origin. Provincials, therefore, had little desire to resist the claims to divine power which the Emperors increasingly made. Cities vied with one another for the honour of erecting temples and organizing priesthoods, and additional power was gained for the new religion by a tendency, which soon became manifest, to identify the divine Emperor with the particular god who had long been locally worshipped.

A religion like this, imposed upon all as an expression of loyalty to the reigning power, could not but come into conflict with any strictly monotheistic faith. This had happened in the case of Judaism when Caligula had outdone all his predecessors in the extravagance of his claims to divinity and even ordered the erection of his statue in the Temple at Jerusalem, an impiety frustrated by his death. Other Emperors, however, had left the Jews alone and allowed their religion as lawful. Collision with the Christians on this matter was for a long time avoided. They had been subject to spasmodic outbursts of persecution, the chief of which was occasioned by Nero's charge against them of having set fire to Rome—a crime for which widespread

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

rumour hinted he was himself responsible. But then the refusal of worship to the Emperor formed no part of the indictment. Inquiry into the beliefs and practices of the Christians was supposed to have convicted them of "hatred to the human race," and as guilty of such a crime they were punished.

Persecution on this ground continued during the next thirty years or so, but only in a local and occasional manner. No general measures were adopted against the Christians. Their persecution, like that of outlaws and robbers, formed part of the ordinary police administration of the Empire and active measures against them would only be taken at the instigation of some informer or on the rise of a wave of popular feeling through some local antagonism. On such occasions, however, it was probably often a matter of some difficulty to determine who were members of a sect composed mostly of poor and obscure people and meeting in secret. But in the reign of Domitian a new test was established by which Christians could easily be identified and their conviction secured.

Domitian, an able man, but cruel and crafty, with a passionate love of pompous display, took the question of his divinity more seriously than any of his predecessors except Caligula. He styled himself "Our Lord and God" in official documents and demanded to be addressed by this exalted title. Under his rule greater strictness was adopted in the enforcement of the imperial religion. Observance of its rites was made a test of loyalty, and if Christians would not submit to this, it was deemed sufficient to

## THE GREAT CONFLICT

prove the charge of treason and thus render them liable to death.

This test struck at the heart of the faith of the Christian. No argument drawn from patriotic considerations could alter the matter for him. He had only one Lord and God and it was impossible for him to confess any other. To attribute divine prerogatives to a man, however exalted his station, was blasphemy. There was only One in whom the Deity had ever become incarnate—the Man Christ Jesus. So, when he was required to throw a pinch of incense into the censer burning before the image of the Emperor and cry “Cæsar is Lord,” he could do no other than assert “Christ is Lord,” and thus convict himself of *lèse-majesté*—treason to the Emperor and the State he represented.

This was the situation the Church was called upon to face in Asia from about 93 to 96 A.D. and it was the crisis thus created which brought forth the Book of the Revelation. John saw clearly that the conflict between loyalty to the Emperor and loyalty to Christ was no mere passing incident. Christianity issued an uncompromising challenge to all authority and power which was incompatible with the claims of Christ. Under the influence of the divine Spirit, John’s prophetic vision took in the range of the great conflict that was being opened up. It was not the absurdly unequal struggle between the poor and despised sect of Christians and the might and magnificence of imperial Rome that it would have appeared to be to the uninspired mind of the time, had such a mind conceived the possibility of the rivalry at all. The part of those humble Chris-

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

tians was but to suffer bravely and endure patiently. Yet, though they were passive, the mighty conflict would go forward and behind all earthly happenings and material phenomena spiritual forces captained by Christ Himself would wage the tremendous warfare and secure at last the glorious triumph. History has more than justified the prophetic view of the situation, though the campaign proved to be longer than John and his fellow-sufferers apparently imagined. Nearly three centuries later the Emperor Julian fell mortally wounded, after having spent his life in the vain endeavour to reorganize the Roman world on a pagan basis. The legend is that, as he fell, he exclaimed: "Thou hast conquered, O Galilean."

But the abiding worth of the Book of the Revelation is that it penetrates beneath the struggle of a particular age and reveals eternal issues which are constantly being fought out. The claim of the State to supreme authority, even in the sphere of individual conscience; the demand that homage should be rendered to power and success; the worship of imperial ideals and ambitions; the plea that material power and military force are the final arbiters of the world's destiny—these things did not pass away for ever when Rome perished. Many and varied have been the forms in which such emanations of the spirit of Antichrist have clothed themselves during the centuries. And still the evil challenges us in new and subtle ways. But beyond all close analogies to the situation in Asia at the end of the first century which can be discovered in the history of succeeding ages, or even at the present

## THE GREAT CONFLICT

time, the Book of the Revelation brings home to us, in vivid pictorial form, the essential facts of the great conflict between good and evil in which all are called to engage, and in which Christ and Satan are the protagonists. We learn from this mysterious book that "our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." But at the same time we see that "they that be with us are more than they that be with them." Whether it be in the sphere of individual life, or of the history of the human race, all power and authority has been committed to the living Christ. The sceptre of government is in pierced hands; the Lamb that was slain is the central and supreme figure on the stage of the world's history.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE LORD OF LIFE AND HISTORY

“ His Kingdom cannot fail,  
He rules o'er earth and heaven ;  
The keys of death and hell  
Are to our Jesus given :  
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice ;  
Rejoice ; again I say, Rejoice.”

C. WESLEY.

WRITING to the Corinthian church, during a period of great tribulation and distress, the Apostle Paul revealed the secret of his support: “ For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory ; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen : for the things which are seen are temporal ; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”<sup>1</sup>

These words might be taken as a motto for the Book of the Revelation. John was enduring tribulation as a convict forced to labour in the quarries of Patmos. His brethren of the Christian churches in the province of Asia were menaced by the terrors of the persecution to which he had already fallen a victim. But he found his strength in looking away from the distressful circumstances of the moment to

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. iv. 17, 18.

## THE LORD OF LIFE AND HISTORY

the unseen and eternal realities. And for him those realities were dominated by the radiant figure of the all-commanding Christ. On the first day of the week, when the Christians were accustomed to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, which they had come to call "the Lord's day," John would give himself to special meditation upon that inspiring theme. He could not now gather with his fellow-disciples to join in the fellowship of prayer and praise, and to pass round the bread and wine which were the symbols of the Master's presence, but he realized that the Lord was with him in his loneliness. On such an occasion, as he was absorbed in the act of contemplation, the prophetic ecstasy came upon him and he saw in spiritual vision the glorified form of Him whom he worshipped.

From the outset he was aware that the vision was no mere mystical satisfaction of his own soul's longing. It was granted to him in his capacity as a prophet and was therefore intended for the warning and consolation of those to whom he had been accustomed to minister. The first sense to awake to the spiritual realities was not sight but hearing. A voice, loud and clear as a trumpet, commanded him to write what he saw in a book and to send it to the seven churches of Asia. And when he turned to see who was speaking, it was in immediate relationship to the churches that he perceived the presence of their Lord.

Seven golden lampstands were set, not one stand with seven branches, such as was placed in the Tabernacle,<sup>1</sup> and as Zechariah had seen in his vision,<sup>2</sup> but

<sup>1</sup> Exod. xxv. 31 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Zech. iv. 2.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

seven separate stands, each with its own lamp, and a form moved among them as it might be of the priest whose duty it was to trim the wicks and renew the oil that the lights might never go out. But this was no earthly priest. Though human in form He was invested with such sacred dignity and royal power as immeasurably distinguished Him from all who served in temples made with hands. In John's visionary perception of Him there blended some features with which the Books of Daniel and Ezekiel had made him familiar, and others suggested by oriental ideas of kingship and Jewish conceptions of high-priesthood, but the whole figure was a new and awe-inspiring manifestation of the transcendent glory of the living Christ.

The long-flowing robe was the ceremonial dress of one in exalted position as priest or king, and the fact that it was high-girded, and with a golden belt, carried still further the suggestions of priesthood and royalty. The head and the hair "white as white wool, white as snow" implied the divine attributes of "one that was ancient of days."<sup>1</sup> The eyes glowing like a flame of fire<sup>2</sup> represented the burning insight of omniscience and the consuming wrath of holiness when regarding sin. The feet, gleaming like the feet of the cherubim of Ezekiel's vision,<sup>3</sup> as if composed of flashing metal still aglow with the heat of the furnace, heightened the impression of power to overcome all evil and trample down all opposition. The sharp two-edged sword (the short tongue-shaped sword of the Romans) proceeding

<sup>1</sup> Dan. vii. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Dan. x. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ezek. i. 7; cf. Dan. x. 6.

## THE LORD OF LIFE AND HISTORY

from the mouth indicated the piercing and destroying power of divine reproof ; and the countenance shining as the sun in its strength revealed the dazzling splendour of the glory before which men and angels veil their faces. And while this majestic figure moved amongst the seven lampstands, He held in His right hand, either as a circlet of brilliant jewels or upon the open palm, seven stars.

Before that awful splendour John fell into a death-like swoon. But that hand in which he had seen the stars was now laid upon his head with reassuring gesture, and the voice which had been sounding in his ears like the breaking of the waves upon the sea-shore<sup>1</sup> spoke comfortable words : “ Fear not ; I am the first and the last, and the living one ; and I became dead and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”

It is impossible to miss the significance of the claim made in these words. “ The first and the last ” is a phrase which Jews used of Jehovah alone, and the imperial power of the keys, too, belonged to Him exclusively. Three keys, said the Rabbis, could not be given to any representative of God—the key of birth, the key of rain and the key of the resurrection of the dead. But the speaker of these words is the living Christ. He refers to the fact of His having passed through the experience of death, but now, enriched by all the sympathy and understanding which that experience has given Him, He lives. No more can He be subject to death ; He is eternally its Lord, able to rescue from its grasp all those who look to Him. So all divine prerogatives are claimed

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ezek. xlivii. 2.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

by the glorified Christ; He bears the authentic marks of Godhead.

And again, from the lips of his divine Lord, John receives the commission to write. He is to tell of his vision, and of all that is shown him of what is and what is to be. Especially is he to expound the symbols of the seven stars and the seven lampstands. The lampstands are seven churches, and the stars are the angels of those churches—their heavenly representatives and counterparts, or, to translate the idea into its nearest equivalent in modern thought, the personifications of their essential spirit.

The choice of seven as the number of churches to be represented is in accordance with the recognized symbolical use of numbers which plays such a large part in all the literature to which this book is akin. Why these particular seven are chosen is not evident. There were other churches in the province of Asia at the time, and there is good reason for believing that some of them were more important and more representative than some of those mentioned here. Sir Wm. Ramsay has suggested that these seven were the heads of seven groups into which the churches of the province had gradually formed themselves,<sup>1</sup> but his exposition of this theory is not altogether convincing. While we remember the fantastic excesses to which “allegorical arithmetic” has often led, we cannot doubt that the choice of the number seven in this instance was determined by symbolism just as much as the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls. Seven is the

<sup>1</sup> *Letters to the Seven Churches*, pp. 178ff.

## THE LORD OF LIFE AND HISTORY

number which suggests both the ideas of sacredness and completeness. And the seven churches taken together stand for the whole Church which John had in mind and which we may regard, in its turn, as representative of the Church Universal. May we not therefore assume that these seven were selected because, from John's intimate knowledge of their circumstances and condition, they afforded the clearest occasion for the messages of warning, rebuke or encouragement, which were needed in varying degrees by the whole Church ? The order in which they are named may have been suggested by the route by which a messenger starting at Ephesus would visit them.

Amongst these seven, then, represented by the lamps, moved the resplendent figure of the living Christ. Small and feeble communities though they were, surrounded by worldliness and paganism, and to a large degree isolated from each other, the risen Lord was in their midst and His intimate relationship to each bound them together as one perfect whole. More than that ; they were in His hand. He held the stars while He moved amongst the lamps. As Paul said of individual believers, so it might also be said of the churches, their life was hid with Christ in God. What need they fear, either from persecutions without or from weakness within, if they realized that truth ? The vision given to John was for their comfort and inspiration. It was to reveal the true spiritual background against which they must view all the happenings of time. It was to show them the eternal behind the transient, so that they might endure as seeing the invisible.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

The message for to-day and every day, is that Jesus Christ is the Lord of human life and history. Christians are sometimes reproached for worshipping the pale, emaciated form of a crucified Lord. Mr H. G. Wells, for instance, contrasts his idea of God with the Christian, and says : “ We are the militant followers of a militant God. We can appreciate and admire the greatness of Christ, this gentle being upon whose nobility the theologians trade. But submission is the remotest quality of all from our God, and a moribund figure is the completest inversion of His likeness as we know Him. A Christianity which shows, for its daily symbol, Christ risen and trampling victoriously upon a broken cross, would be far more in the spirit of our worship.”<sup>1</sup> Curiously enough, in a foot-note to this passage, Mr Wells gives two quotations, one from Bishop Westcott and the other from Bishop Temple, which he says express almost exactly the same sentiments as his own, but which he regards as “exceptional utterances, interesting as showing how clearly parallel are the tendencies within and without Christianity.” But so far as Christianity is concerned the tendency is certainly not new, nor are the utterances referred to exceptional. The Book of the Revelation itself is a refutation of all such suggestions. It is true that there have often been those who have misinterpreted Christianity by dwelling exclusively on the thought of the crucified Saviour ; but perhaps there are more to-day who misrepresent it by taking the idea of the living, reigning Lord and interpreting it, in an unspiritual fashion, according to merely

<sup>1</sup> *God the Invisible King*, p. 122.

## THE LORD OF LIFE AND HISTORY

earthly conceptions of kingship. There is no contradiction between the idea of the crucified and that of the militant Christ. The acceptance of the cross was not passive submission to evil ; it was the most vigorous combating of its power.

“ ‘ O Captain of the wars, whence won Ye so great scars ?  
In what fight did Ye smite, and what manner was the foe ?  
Was it on a day of rout they compassed Thee about,  
Or gat Ye these adornings when Ye wrought their overthrow?’

‘ Twas on a day of rout they girded Me about,  
They wounded all My brow, and they smote Me through the  
side :  
My hand held no sword when I met their armèd horde  
And the conqueror fell down, and the Conquered bruised his  
pride.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

It was by the cross that Christ conquered and it is from the cross that He reigns. So the glorified Christ of John’s vision, with all the impressive signs of unlimited power and authority upon Him, is still the one who “ became dead.”

No apology needs to be made to the world for presenting it with a crucified Lord. The cross is the perpetual challenge to the world’s mistaken conceptions of success and lordship. To pass by the cross in the presentation of the victorious Christ is to miss the compelling and subduing element of that great conception, and though it may help a popular appeal it will not secure a lasting devotion. As Mrs Herman puts it : “ It is quite easy to impress the ‘ man in the street ’ with the figure of the divine Warrior-King riding forth conquering and to conquer. The world never finds it difficult to

<sup>1</sup> Francis Thompson, *The Veteran of Heaven*.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

take off its hat to success. But our mission is not to impress men ; it is to subdue them by the mighty weakness of the cross. It is not the lifted hat we seek, but the bended knee.”<sup>1</sup>

We are vividly conscious to-day that life is full of struggle and conflict. Material power and physical force seem to many to be the dominating factors of history. But when we recognize in a crucified Redeemer the Lord of Life and History we see that the final issue of the conflict must be determined by the omnipotence of suffering love. Here is the secret of Christian hope and confidence, possessing which we may march into every battle to the music of the triumphant song : “ Unto Him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by His blood and made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto His God and Father ; to Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”

<sup>1</sup> *Christianity in the New Age*, p. 110.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

“ The world is very evil,  
The times are waxing late ;  
Be sober and keep vigil,  
The Judge is at the gate,  
The Judge that comes in mercy,  
The Judge that comes with might,  
To terminate the evil,  
To diadem the right.”

BERNARD DE MORLAIX, Monk of Cluny ;  
tr. J. M. NEALE.

WHAT we are accustomed to call the “ letters ” to the seven churches should rather be described as “ messages.” They are not letters like those of St Paul ; they were probably never sent separately to the individual churches,<sup>1</sup> nor meant to be read apart from each other and the book in which they are included. Nevertheless, they were written with immediate regard to the circumstances and needs of the churches addressed. In his *Letters to the Seven Churches* Sir Wm. Ramsay has used the wealth of his knowledge of the history, geography and archæology of Asia Minor to illustrate in many striking and

<sup>1</sup> Dr Charles thinks they were, and that much later they were altered and adapted to fit in with the general scheme of the Book of the Revelation. The present writer, though he has profound respect for Dr Charles’ unrivalled knowledge of the subject, cannot help feeling that this theory creates more difficulties than it removes.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

suggestive ways these two chapters of the Book of the Revelation. We may doubt whether the parallel between the history and geography of these cities and the position of the little Christian communities living in them was as manifest to the Christian prophet of the first century as to the distinguished archæologist of the twentieth, but there is abundant evidence that John had each church vividly in his mind's eye as he wrote, and that what he said was prompted by a similar sense of pastoral responsibility to that which characterizes the letters of the Apostle Paul.

But while John had in view the position and necessities of the individual churches, he passed beyond the individual to the general. The seven he dealt with were representative of the Church as a whole, and it was to her that his prophetic message was addressed. He may have written these two chapters after completing the main portion of his work so that he could say some things more plainly and directly than he could do through the apocalyptic imagery of his visions. Even so these messages form an integral part of the book. The living Lord who sends the message in each case is described in terms of the vision related in the first chapter and the seven separate descriptions reproduce the figure of the vision in its entirety. Allusions are made and metaphors used which can only be understood in the light of the symbolism of the later chapters. And the conditions and circumstances of the life of the churches, as reflected in these messages, give the earthly and temporal background for the visions that follow.

## MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

To realize this background a detailed exposition of these two most interesting and suggestive chapters is not necessary. In itself such an exposition is exceedingly helpful but it may easily obscure the view of the meaning of the Book of the Revelation as a whole, which is the object of our present quest. For this purpose we need to blend various aspects of the life and character of these seven churches into a picture that portrays the essential features of the Church in that age and enables us to compare with it the Church as we know it to-day.

The conflict between the ideal and the actual was evident in John's day as it has been in all ages. The ideal had not been defeated. In the life and character of two of the churches it shone with undimmed radiance. Smyrna and Philadelphia receive the unqualified approval of their Lord. Yet they were not what would usually be called "successful" churches. Smyrna was an influential and prosperous city, proud of the strong position it had won and ambitious to be recognized as the first city of Asia, but the Christians living there did not share in the city's prosperity. They had suffered much from the bitter enmity of the Jews, whose bigotry and persecuting zeal was such that John described them as "a synagogue of Satan," and their poverty was doubtless aggravated by the spoiling of their goods during the outbreaks of mob violence which Jewish fanaticism occasioned. But weak and struggling as she appears to be, the church at Smyrna, in the eyes of her Lord, possesses the true riches. And though there is immediately before her a short but terrible period during which she will have to suffer far more

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

than she has yet done, He has confidence in her fidelity even to the point of martyrdom and He promises an imperishable reward—not a fading garland such as was so eagerly sought after by those who participated in the great athletic contests for which the city was famous, but a crown which would be “life” in all the fullness of meaning of that pregnant word.

Like Smyrna, Philadelphia was one of the least prominent and influential of the churches of Asia and she shares the distinction of receiving no word of reproach. Her trial also has hitherto been due to the malignant hostility of members of the Jewish community. They claimed the exclusive possession of the divine favour and the right to close the very gates of the Kingdom of Heaven against the apostates who had joined the hated followers of the Nazarene. But they were not the true Israel; spiritual privilege and prerogative had passed from them to the Christian Church. And the “key”—the power of opening and shutting—was in the hands of Him who was sending the message. He had set before these faithful disciples an open door and all the sentences of excommunication passed by the synagogue could not shut it.<sup>1</sup> One day those proud, contemptuous Jews would discover their mistake and their attitude would be changed into one of respectful homage. Meanwhile the Philadelphian Christians must share in the persecution which was

<sup>1</sup> Many expositors interpret the phrase “a door opened” in the sense in which Paul uses it as referring to opportunity for missionary work. But such a reference does not appear to be called for here and the description of Christ in the address (v. 7) strongly suggests the interpretation which has been adopted above.

## MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

to overtake the whole Church at the hands of the Empire, but the same patient devotion which had sustained them under the sufferings caused by Jewish hostility would carry them through the fiercer trial, and in the midst of it Christ Himself would keep them.<sup>1</sup>

The churches at Sardis and Laodicea form a striking contrast to those at Smyrna and Philadelphia. Their parlous condition does not appear to have been due to the pressure of outward opposition or even to the disintegrating force of erroneous beliefs. Indeed, to the casual observer, they seemed to be in a flourishing condition. Sardis appeared to be a "live" church, full of activities of various kinds. The Laodicean Christians shared in the prosperity of the city in which they lived and possessed considerable influence and prestige. But both these churches had lost their spiritual vitality; earnestness and enthusiasm had decayed and a spirit of compromise with the world had prevailed. In Laodicea the failure showed itself in self-complacency and carelessness, while in Sardis there was positive moral contamination from the licentious atmosphere of a city devoted to the infamous worship of Cybele, the Mother Deity of the Phrygians. Yet even in a church so sternly condemned as Sardis there are some singled out for gracious and tender words of approval, and Laodicea, despite her nauseating condition, is patiently and affectionately exhorted, in the hope that there are some among her members who will recognize the voice of her excluded and forgotten Lord and so respond to it that He shall

<sup>1</sup> Rev. iii. 10. Cf. John xvii. 15.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

once more enter into her fellowship bringing all that she really needs.

In the case of the other three churches the praise and blame are mingled. Ephesus was the chief centre of the Christian faith in the East and the church there could show a very creditable record. She had been unwearied in toil and patience, steadfast in her opposition to false teaching and to moral laxity, swift to detect impostors who sought to prey upon the unwary—a pillar of orthodoxy and a pattern of zeal! But her jealous concern for purity of doctrine and cleanness of life had put a strain upon her Christian charity which it had not been able to bear. Suspicion, censoriousness and faction had done their deadly work and she had lost the love of her early days—that love which the Master Himself had said was to be the distinguishing characteristic of His disciples.<sup>1</sup> Such failure was disastrous; unless she repented and showed her repentance by returning to those practical works of charity in which she had been prominent at first, destruction must fall on her.

Pergamum had proved her loyalty in the hour of trial. That city was one of the earliest centres of Emperor-worship<sup>2</sup> and already an outbreak had taken place of the conflict between Cæsar and Christ, of which this book has so much to say, and one of her members, Antipas, had suffered martyrdom. But at the moment the peril of the church was from

<sup>1</sup> This seems to be the true interpretation. The loss of “first love” in the more modern and familiar sense of the phrase was the failure specially indicated in the case of Laodicea, though in that instance it is described as “lukewarmness.”

<sup>2</sup> See p. 17.

## MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

within. It arose from certain members of the party of the Nicolaitans who were found there as well as at Ephesus. They are fiercely denounced and their sin is likened to that of Balaam who seduced Israel to the licentious worship of a foreign god. Probably the distinguishing characteristic of the Nicolaitans was that they rejected the rule against eating meat consecrated to idols. By so doing they opened the gate to a flood of temptations. In a city so given up to paganism as Pergamum, the only hope of maintaining Christian purity lay in preserving an absolute separation in social relationships. To relax the prohibition of meat consecrated to an idol meant opening the way to attendance at entertainments and feasts at which debauchery and obscenity were the rule. Thus, in the circumstances and conditions of life in such a place and at such a time, what might have been regarded merely as a conscientious scruple necessarily gained the force of a genuine moral principle, disregard of which must imperil the soul's salvation.

At Thyatira the evil had bitten deeper. That church was full of life and energy and had made steady progress in character and conduct. But the issue raised by the Nicolaitans had become acute. An influential woman, one who was recognized as a prophetess, had championed the "liberal" view and a good many members of the church had been led away by her. Thyatira was a commercial city and almost all its citizens belonged to some trade-guild, membership of which secured solid business and social advantages. But it was impossible to belong to these guilds without sharing in their

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

banquets at which not only was acknowledgment made of pagan deities but there were orgies of unbridled revelry which could not be tolerated by any high ideal of purity. It was doubtless argued by the prophetess and her followers that the religious element in these feasts was merely a form which did not involve any denial of the Christian faith and that the excesses which took place were not essential and need not be participated in by the Christian members of the guild. They probably even claimed a superior enlightenment, saying that they must be acquainted with evil as well as good, and pitied those who knew not "the deep things." Deep things, indeed they were, but "of Satan" not of God ! And those who gloried in them should meet with terrible retribution if they did not repent. Instead of the couch on which they shared the riotous enjoyment of the guild-feast they would find themselves cast on a bed of suffering and death.

In these seven messages we have the principal features of the situation of the Church as the prophet saw it. There were many loyal and faithful souls to be reckoned upon—some even in the darkest places. But the conflict with outward enemies and inward weaknesses was proceeding with varying fortunes. On the whole, the Church had successfully braved the storm of outward opposition which had, up to this time, come chiefly from Jewish quarters. But the steady pressure of pagan surroundings, the inevitable tendency to seek ways of compromise with a social and business life that was honeycombed with idolatry and sensuality was causing severe strain in many directions and bringing

## MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

to light dangerous weaknesses. On the other hand, where the conflict had been less severe and a greater measure of outward prosperity obtained, there was self-complacency and lukewarmness, while, where there had been successful endurance, there was reason to fear lest the victory had been won at the cost of the most precious possession of brotherly love. But now it behoved the Church to set her house in order, repenting of all failures and repairing all weaknesses, for a great and terrible trial was about to come upon her, after which the prophet believed that the long cherished hope of the Lord's return would be gloriously fulfilled.

Yet the Church had not to look to any promise for the future as the ground of her confidence. Her Lord was not absent from her life. In the majestic vision with which the book opens, the seven churches have been seen as seven lampstands among which He moved, and their angels as the stars He held in His hand. And now these separate messages reveal His intimate concern with all that touched the life of each little community. He is described in the addresses in different aspects of His appearance in that splendid vision and generally the aspect chosen has some particular appropriateness to the need of the church addressed. But besides the encouraging fact that He has not forsaken the Church, despite all faithlessness and failure, indication that her case is not hopeless is given in the promises made to those who overcome.

It is very significant that these promises are made in each case not merely to the church addressed

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

but to the individual members. In the famous speech of Pericles praising the Athenian heroes who had fallen in battle he says : “ The sacrifice they collectively made was individually repaid to them ; for they received again each one for himself a praise which grows not old.”<sup>1</sup> So it is with these warriors of a spiritual strife. And in each case the reward is appropriate to the peculiar conditions of the struggle. Ephesus is in danger of destruction but there those who are victorious are promised immortal life—admission to the privilege forfeited in Eden.<sup>2</sup> Smyrna through faithfulness in suffering was winning life in its fullest and richest sense and those who triumphed there are promised immunity from the terrible fate of the second death in the lake of fire.<sup>3</sup> The victors at Pergamum, who refused the forbidden food of pagan feasts, should partake of a heavenly banquet—the manna in the ark which, according to Jewish tradition, Jeremiah had hidden in a cave until the Messianic reign should come.<sup>4</sup> They should also receive a white stone with a new name, secret to themselves and Christ, which would be the symbol of some gift of power, like the amulets of the popular magic of the time. In the message to Thyatira the reward mentioned is the sharing of Christ’s authority and the mysterious addition is made of the gift of “ the morning star ”—perhaps the promise that the future belonged to the victor :

“ Our low life was the level’s and the night’s ;  
He’s for the morning.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thucydides 2, 43 (Jowett).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rev. xxii. 2 and 14.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rev. xx. 6, 14; xxi. 8.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Macc. ii. 1-8.

<sup>5</sup> Browning, *A Grammarian’s Funeral*.

## MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

To the faithful few in Sardis who had not defiled the earthly robes of flesh should be given the heavenly resurrection body, garments of light and glory, and their names should not be removed from the roll of God's own people.<sup>1</sup>

The reward promised to the faithful of Philadelphia would make a special appeal to people living in such a city, full, as it was, of temples with their numerous pillars and statues. The Christian Church was often likened to a spiritual temple and those whose victory was won by endurance and patience would be its strength and support. The priest who officiated in the temple devoted to the worship of the Emperor would, at the end of his year of office, erect his statue in it, inscribing upon it his name, his father's name, his place of birth and his year of office. So should the faithful stand for ever in the temple of God. But the names written upon them would be His name and the name of His city—that sacred name, to know the secret of which gave power over its bearer. So God bestows upon the faithful the privilege of invoking His power, entering into the secret of His nature and abiding for ever in His presence. A similar great and glorious promise is made to those who overcome at Laodicea. They should share in the triumph and reign of their Lord.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rev. xx. 12 and 15.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CREATIVE POWER AND REDEMPTIVE LOVE

“ Love is and was my King and Lord,  
And will be, tho’ as yet I keep  
Within his court on earth, and sleep  
Encompass’d by his faithful guard,  
  
And hear at times a sentinel  
Who moves about from place to place,  
And whispers to the worlds of space,  
In the deep night, that all is well.”

TENNYSON.

THE Revelation was not given to John in a solitary ecstatic experience, but we need not look for a detailed account of the separate visions which came to him in the book in which he has recorded the complete narrative of them. There are, however, indications of new beginnings from time to time and one such occurs at the commencement of the fourth chapter.

Again the mystic sense was quickened within him. He saw a door into heaven standing opened and heard the trumpet voice, which at first had called him to write, summoning him to go up and see the things which must come to pass. In his first vision he had been commanded to write “ the things which are

## THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CREATIVE POWER

and the things which shall come to pass hereafter.”<sup>1</sup> The messages to the seven churches dealt with “things that are,” but only “things that are” on earth, though they were viewed from the heavenly standpoint. More than that, however, was needed. “Things that are” in heaven must be manifested if “the things that shall come to pass” were to be understood. We can never understand earthly happenings unless we view them in the light of heavenly realities. The drama of human history needs to be seen against the background of the divine and eternal order. So when John was again caught up into a spiritual ecstasy it was these things that were first revealed to him. Before he received the visions of judgment he was confirmed in that optimism of faith, which seems so unwarrantable to those who have no spiritual insight :

“ God’s in His heaven—  
All’s right with the world ! ”

But what sort of a God must one believe in to hold such a daring creed as that ? John’s vision will answer that question, for the conception it sets forth, in the language of a symbolism which kindles even the dullest imagination, is that of the Sovereignty of Creative Power and Redemptive Love.

A throne is set in heaven and there is One sitting upon it. That “One” John ventures neither to name nor describe. Indeed he sees no form, only a dazzling glory of light and colour. Ezekiel had described a similar manifestation of the divine presence in a fiery cloud glowing and flashing with colours<sup>2</sup> such as he had seen in a brilliant rainbow

<sup>1</sup> Rev. i. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek. i. 27 and 28.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

in the clear atmosphere of the East. Probably the form of John's vision and the language in which he described it owes something to this vision of Ezekiel. John likens the colours he sees to the flashing of gems, the jasper and the sardius (perhaps the opal and the blood-red cornelian) seen through a halo of emerald green which overarches the throne like a rainbow. No strain is put upon the symbolism if the green halo is regarded as a gracious provision enabling weak human eyes to approach the blazing light which veils the divine presence. Pliny's *Natural History*, a book written during the same age as the Revelation, says that when the eyes are blinded by any other sight, that of the emerald restores them.

But though John does not see the form of Him who sits upon the throne, there are other beings in that presence chamber whom he can describe. Ranged round the throne are twenty-four other thrones and on them seated twenty-four white-robed elders wearing crowns of gold. These are not to be regarded as representatives of the Church, whether Jewish or Christian. They are simply an order of angels in immediate attendance upon God. There are allusions to them in Jewish literature and probably St Paul refers to them when he mentions "thrones" first in the order of the celestial hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> Why there are twenty-four of them is not clear, but the fact that, at a later stage of the vision, they render the priestly ministry of offering the prayers of the saints as golden bowls of incense,<sup>2</sup> suggests that they are looked upon as the heavenly

<sup>1</sup> Col. i. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. v. 8.

## THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CREATIVE POWER

representatives of the twenty-four courses of priests which served in the Jewish Temple.<sup>1</sup>

Besides these elders there stand round the throne, one in the middle of each side of it, four mysterious "living creatures." These correspond to the four cherubim of Ezekiel's vision,<sup>2</sup> but instead of having four faces each, the likeness of the lion, the ox, the man and the eagle are distributed between them and instead of four wings they have six, like the seraphim of Isaiah's vision.<sup>3</sup> Beneath their wings they are full of eyes, suggesting the sleepless vigilance with which they guard the throne and, like the seraphim Isaiah saw, they are engaged in ceaseless adoration.

It is not necessary to discuss the origin and development of the idea of the cherubim in Jewish belief to understand their place in John's vision. For him they are the highest order of angels and any attempt to find a symbolical meaning in them, as, for instance, the personification of the powers of nature, draws away attention to a detail which is not intended to have any significance apart from the whole conception of the heavenly court to which it contributes.

The sense of awe in the divine presence, which is aided by the perception of these two orders of angelic beings, is deepened by the "lightnings, voices and thunders" which proceed out of the throne and the seven lamps of fire burning before it, representing the seven spirits of God—the fullness and intensity of the energy of the divine life. The crystal sea also, which stretches between the prophet

<sup>1</sup> 1 Chron. xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek. i.; cf. x. 2, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. vi.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

standing at the door of heaven and the throne on which his gaze is fixed, gives the impression of the distance which intervenes between him and the Majesty he contemplates. All these details of the vision have their counterpart in the Old Testament, but their combination in this prophetic vision is unique and leaves an indelible impression upon the spiritual imagination. What that impression was for the prophet John is shown by the outburst of song which he records, for as the cherubim praise the holiness of God, the four-and-twenty elders, casting their crowns before the throne in token of loyal homage, chant a hymn of praise to His creative power : “ Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honour and the power : for thou didst create all things, and because of thy will they were, and were created.”

Like the chorus of the Greek drama this angelic song forms a sort of commentary on what is being shown to the spectator, interpreting its inner significance and preparing the mind and heart for the fitting response to it. It is the Sovereignty of Creative Power that the vision reveals and the song expresses. The earthly ruler from whom John and his fellow-Christians stood in peril bade his servants refer to him as “ Our Lord and God.” Christians are reminded of the only One who can claim that title, and because He is on the throne they need not fear. Yet this is not all they need for the encouragement of their faith and the confirmation of their hope. There is an element lacking in the conception of God the vision thus far suggests and a note missing from the great chorus of praise—a note which would

## THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CREATIVE POWER

transform the Hymn of Creation into the Hymn of Redemption.

So, in the kaleidoscopic fashion of these inspired visions, there is a shifting of some features of the scene and fresh things are observed. The form behind the dazzling glory becomes visible to the prophet and he sees a book in His hand. Like the roll of Ezekiel's vision<sup>1</sup> it is so full that the writing has overflowed to the reverse side and can be seen as the book is held rolled up in the hand. Perhaps John felt instinctively that this book, like Ezekiel's, contained "lamentations and mourning and woe." Anyhow, there were various associations of ideas which would lead him to recognize this as the Book of Destiny and to expect to find in it that revelation of the things which were to come to pass which had been promised him.

But the book is "close sealed with seven seals" and though a strong angel, in a voice which sounds through the universe, challenges any one who is worthy to come and break the seals, there is no response and John weeps much in bitter disappointment that the revelation he expected cannot be made. Then one of the elders comforts him with the assurance that the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has won the victory which enables Him to open the book. So John looks up through his tears to see this mighty conqueror, but instead of a Lion he sees a Lamb. The symbol of strength and force is supplanted by the symbol of submissiveness, innocence and gentleness. Moreover the Lamb is evidently one which had been

<sup>1</sup> Ezek. ii. 10.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

offered in sacrifice, for though it lives it bears the marks of having been slaughtered. Further details are added which enrich the symbolism but make any harmonious reproduction of the vision impossible. The Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes, signifying the perfection of strength and knowledge. It stands "in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and in the midst of the elders"—a phrase which cannot be interpreted by the construction of a plan of the heavenly court, but which conveys the idea that the Lamb is the central figure of the scene and upon it the eyes of all present are fastened.

Then the Lamb advances and takes the book from the hand of Him who sits upon the throne. This significant action is the signal for a fresh and more glorious outburst of praise than that which the prophet had previously heard. It begins with the four living creatures and the four-and-twenty elders, who are now seen to have harps and golden bowls of incense. They prostrate themselves before the Lamb, paying it the reverence they had previously paid to Him who sat upon the throne, and as they do so they sing a new song : "Worthy art thou to take the book and to open the seals thereof : for thou wast slain and didst purchase unto God with thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation, and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests ; and they reign upon the earth." Then the strain is taken up by the innumerable host of angels who sing : "Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive the power, and riches, and wisdom, and might, and honour and glory and blessing." And,

## THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CREATIVE POWER

finally, from the remotest regions of the universe, all created things join in the great chorus, which grows and swells into the splendid doxology : “ Unto him that sitteth on the throne and unto the Lamb, be the blessing, and the honour, and the glory, and the dominion for ever and ever.” The last word, as the first, is left to the four living creatures who utter their great “ Amen,” while the elders bow in speechless adoration.

The message of this sublime vision may be suggested by the words of Jesus : “ Ye believe in God, believe also in me.” To hold, in days of appalling darkness and dreadful calamity, the faith that

“ God’s in His heaven—  
All’s right with the world ! ”

is only possible when God is recognized as One to whom belongs not only the sovereignty due to the power which created the universe but also that which must be yielded to the love which has made all the burden of evil and suffering its own concern and borne it in uttermost self-sacrifice. John had perceived the glory of such a God in Jesus Christ, and the vision granted to him in Patmos was the fresh and vivid assurance of this unalterable fact in the strength of which he and his fellow-sufferers could face anything and everything which came to them.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE BREAKING OF THE SEALS

“ O Lily of the King ! I speak a heavy thing,  
O patience, most sorrowful of daughters !  
Lo, the hour is at hand for the troubling of the land,  
And red shall be the breaking of the waters.

Sit fast upon thy stalk, when the blast shall with thee talk,  
With the mercies of the King for thine awning ;  
And the just understand that thine hour is at hand,  
Thine hour at hand with power in the dawning.  
When the nations lie in blood, and their kings a broken brood,  
Look up, O most sorrowful of daughters !  
Lift up thy head and hark what sounds are in the dark  
For His feet are coming to thee on the waters ! ”

FRANCIS THOMPSON.

THE central portion of the book, to which we now come, may be likened to a drama in three acts, the Seals, the Trumpets and the Bowls.<sup>1</sup> These three acts, however, do not follow each other in unbroken sequence. Three times the progress of the drama is interrupted by the description of separate visions, the purpose of which is to comfort the spectators in view of what has been or will be shown.

The seals are opened by the Lamb but the contents of the book are not read out. The revelation

<sup>1</sup> This analogy is helpful but it is pressed too far when the attempt is made to get the whole book into a strictly dramatic scheme.

## THE BREAKING OF THE SEALS

is to the eye rather than to the ear and the Judgment which is to take place is unfolded in action in the vision of the prophet. At the opening of the first four seals four different coloured horses appear with their riders, each summoned by one of the four living creatures “saying, as with a voice of thunder, Come.” The four horses and their colours are suggested by the visions of Zechariah,<sup>1</sup> but their significance here is quite different from that which they had for the Old Testament prophet.

The first horse is white ; its rider carries a bow and there is given to him a crown, for he comes forth conquering and to conquer. White was the colour of victory and the horse with its rider is therefore at once recognized to be symbolical of triumphant war. But who is the conqueror ? In a later passage of this book <sup>2</sup> Christ is represented as riding on a white horse but that cannot be the meaning here, as the time for His victorious manifestation has not yet arrived and, besides, He is now before us as the Lamb opening the seals. It is no more satisfactory to interpret this horse and its rider as the victorious progress of the Gospel. All four of these horses with their riders represent woes which must fall upon the earth and this horse and rider must therefore be interpreted not of any spiritual warfare by which evil is overthrown, but of war, which is itself an evil destroying life and happiness. The fact that the horseman carries a bow suggests that he was the Parthian king. The Parthians were the foes whom the inhabitants of the Eastern provinces of the Empire had most cause to dread, and their

<sup>1</sup> Zech. i. 8; vi. 1-8.

<sup>2</sup> xix. 11.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

warriors were all horsemen expert in the use of the bow.<sup>1</sup> It was natural enough that the idea of war, especially a war of invasion and conquest, should be associated in the mind of anyone living in Asia Minor with the thought of the Parthians. Besides this, as we shall see later on, there was at this time a widespread anticipation of the reappearance of Nero from the East aided by Parthian armies.<sup>2</sup>

The second horse is red and its rider is given a great sword. The charge that he should "take peace from the earth, and that they should slay one another" makes a further reference to war incontestable, but this time it is not the aggression of an external enemy but revolution and civil war within the Empire itself. The third horse is black and its rider carries a balance in his hand. A voice from the midst of the living creatures interprets the symbolism. Famine will follow war and the scarcity will be so great that the whole day's wages of a labouring man will be absorbed by the purchase of a daily ration of wheat for himself, while if he buys barley, as a cheaper food, he will not have enough for himself and his family. And yet while the necessities of life are so scarce, of its luxuries, the oil and the wine, there will be no lack. Probably there is a reference here to an agitation that would be fresh in the memory of John and his readers. In the year 92 Domitian had attempted to reduce the vineyards in the provinces by half in order to promote the cultivation of cereals, but he had been obliged to withdraw the edict owing to the violent opposition

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ramsay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rev. xvi. 12 and see pp. 73, 95, 116, 118, 127.

## THE BREAKING OF THE SEALS

of the Asiatic cities. Those who recall the controversy in days of war scarcity, as to the respective claims of Beer and Bread, will not fail to appreciate the prophet's point !

The fourth horse is pale or livid—the colour of a corpse—and its rider is Death. If the symbolism is to be interpreted consistently Death here must be understood as Pestilence in the way we use the word when we speak of the Black Death, and in any case that meaning is predominant. But in the passage as it stands other forms of death are included, though two of them have already been referred to under the symbols of War and Famine. These words, however, are a quotation from the book of Ezekiel<sup>1</sup> and the overlapping of ideas they introduce may be accounted for by the writer's impulse to use the phraseology of earlier prophets whenever it recurs to his mind as in any way embodying the conceptions he wishes to set forth. A further complication of the imagery is found in the introduction of Hades, who is described as following with Death. Hades is the Greek form of the Hebrew word Sheol, which was the name given by the Jews to the vague, shadowy realm in which departed spirits were believed to continue their existence. John's general usage was to associate Hades with Death,<sup>2</sup> and he may have done so here without clearly visualizing the place of Hades, whether as a second rider on the livid horse or not. Possibly, however, the reference to Hades here may be due to the wandering attention of an early copyist of the manuscript who followed the prophet's usual habit of bracketing Death and Hades together.

<sup>1</sup> Ezek. xiv. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rev. i. 18; xx. 13, 14.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

The opening of the fifth seal introduces a scene of different character. Instead of the approaching calamities being indicated by symbolical figures who are directly charged to bring them about, they are now indirectly suggested by a vision of some who have already passed through similar experiences and who wait their consummation until their brethren can share it with them. Persecution is now the evil in view and the souls of those who have already endured their martyrdom are represented as the blood of sacrifices flowing at the foot of the heavenly altar on which they have been offered. It is tempting to see included in these the martyrs of pre-Christian ages and to illustrate the conception from the famous eleventh chapter of Hebrews,<sup>1</sup> but there can be little doubt that John is thinking only of Christians. They had suffered, as he was suffering, "for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."<sup>2</sup> It was those who had been killed in the terrible persecution under Nero whom John would chiefly have in mind, though he would remember others, such as Antipas<sup>3</sup> and the first disciples who were faithful unto death, whose story we have in the Acts of the Apostles. These souls, like so many others still in the flesh, are distressed at the delay of the vindication of God's righteous judgment. The passionate cry "How long?" goes up from them as it has done from the saints through all the ages. The reply is one of assurance and comfort to them, but ominous to the prophet and those to whom he writes. They are told to wait until their number is completed and are assured that the interval

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Heb. xi. 39 and 40.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. i. 9; cf. vi. 9.

<sup>3</sup> ii. 13.

## THE BREAKING OF THE SEALS

will be short. It was a common Jewish belief of the time that the end of the world would come when the destined number of the righteous was complete. Some of the references to this belief in other Jewish books show that "the righteous" are considered to be the martyrs and John adopts that view here. The number of the martyrs will soon be complete; it is for him and his readers that the souls beneath the altar wait. Meanwhile there is given to them a white robe,<sup>1</sup> the heavenly vesture of the resurrection body with which being clothed they shall no longer be found naked souls.<sup>2</sup> Early Christian thought on the intermediate state had many variations, but John's conception seems to be that the martyrs received this heavenly body as a special privilege anticipating the final bliss of the righteous.<sup>3</sup>

The opening of the sixth seal brings the climax of the judgments in upheavals and convulsions of the physical order. John vividly describes the state of panic and terror which follows these portents, affecting all ranks and classes. In their consternation they think the Day of Judgment has come and conscience lashes them to despair. Earthquake, eclipse and shooting stars were regarded by the world of that day as sure signs of disaster and doom and in the Jewish literature with which this book has so many affinities they are regularly described as precursors of the end of the age. The imagery is directly traceable to the Old Testament prophets: "And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into

<sup>1</sup> Cf. p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. v. 2 and 3.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. p. 140.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come.”<sup>1</sup> “I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering.”<sup>2</sup> “And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll : and all their host shall fade away, as the leaf fadeth from off the vine, and as a fading leaf from the fig tree.”<sup>3</sup> “And men shall go unto the caves of the rocks, and into the holes of the earth, from before the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of His majesty when He ariseth to shake mightily the earth.”<sup>4</sup> “They shall say to the mountains, Cover us ; and to the hills, Fall on us.”<sup>5</sup>

But there is another great passage which the opening of each of these six seals brings to mind, namely the discourse of our Lord upon the Last Things recorded in Matthew xxiv., Mark xiii. and Luke xxi. Many scholars think that this discourse is a Jewish apocalypse which has been incorporated with the Gospel narrative, but other passages in the recorded sayings of Christ and the persistence of these ideas in the early Christian Church are sufficient to show that there was a prominent element in our Lord’s teaching with which the discourse as it has come down to us is in harmony. Our Lord clothed the truths He had to teach His disciples in forms that were familiar to them, but He constantly enriched and transformed the old conceptions. So it was with these ideas about the coming end of the age and the approach of the Messianic reign. As Dr Sanday has put it: “So far as He took over the

<sup>1</sup> Joel ii. 30, 31.

<sup>2</sup> Isa. 1. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. xxxiv. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Isa. ii. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Hosea, x. 8.

## THE BREAKING OF THE SEALS

transcendent supernatural side of the expectation, He transformed and spiritualized while He adopted it.”<sup>1</sup>

In this way we must deal with John’s vision if we are to discover its significance for ourselves. The judgments which come into view at the opening of the seals are things that were happening or expected to happen in the world of his day as John knew it. They are things which have happened again and again in the course of history and they happen still. Wars and revolutions, with the want and suffering and the breaking up of all social order which inevitably follow in their train, are familiar phenomena to-day. Once more the age seems to be coming to an end and men’s hearts fail them for fear as they contemplate the confusion and distress. It is not possible to be content with any religion which cannot include all this in its scheme of things. But the religion of Jesus Christ is adequate to the situation. It shows us that all these happenings are under the control of infinite, holy, suffering Love. The Lamb that was slain breaks the seals and the forces that are unloosed are ultimately made to contribute to the great end He has in view.

Dr Vaughan, in his *Lectures* published sixty years ago, takes this chapter as a commentary on the discourse of Christ above referred to and speaking of the Master’s prophecy in words which may be applied to the servant’s, he says: “Wherever there is a little flock in a waste wilderness; wherever there is a Church in a world; wherever there

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Christ in Recent Research*, p. 64. See also footnote to p. 160.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

is a power of unbelief, ungodliness, and violence, throwing itself upon Christ's faith and Christ's people, and seeking to overbear and to demolish and to destroy ; whether that power be the power of Jewish bigotry and fanaticism, as in the days of the first disciples ; or of Pagan Rome, with its idolatries and its cruelties, as in the days of St John and of the Revelation ; or of Papal Rome, with its lying wonders and its antichristian assumptions, in ages later still ; or of open and rampant atheism, as in the days of the first French Revolution ; or of a subtler and more insidious infidelity like that which is threatening now to deceive, if it were possible, the very elect ; wherever and whatever this power be—and it has had a thousand forms, and may be destined yet to assume a thousand more—then, in each successive century, the words of Christ to His first disciples adapt themselves afresh to the circumstances of His struggling servants ; warn them of danger, exhort them to patience, arouse them to hope, assure them of victory ; tell of a near end, for the individual and for the generation ; tell also of a far end, not for ever to be postponed, for time itself and the world ; predict a destruction which shall befall each enemy of the truth and predict a destruction which shall befall the enemy himself, whom each in turn has represented and served ; explain the meaning of tribulation, show whence it comes, and point to its swallowing up in glory ; reveal the moving hand above, and disclose from behind the cloud which conceals it, the clear definite purpose and the unchanging loving will.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Lectures on the Revelation of St John*, Vol. I. pp. 182, 183.  
60

## CHAPTER 7

### TRIUMPHANT HOSTS

"The most refined mysticism, the most exalted spiritual experience is *partly* a product of the social and intellectual environment in which the personal life of the mystic has formed and matured. There are no experiences of any sort which are independent of preformed expectations or unaffected by the prevailing beliefs of the time. Every bit of our inner or outer life, however much it is our own, is shot through with lines of colour due to social and racial suggestions. . . . Mystical experiences will be, perforce, saturated with the dominant ideas of the group to which the mystic belongs, and they will reflect the expectations of that group and that period."—Dr RUFUS JONES.

THE seventh chapter of the Book of the Revelation contains the first of the three interludes in the progress of the drama, referred to at the commencement of our last chapter. John has just been describing the state of panic and terror which would overtake all ranks and classes as the awful Day of Judgment drew near. Before proceeding to a further description of the woes to come he pauses to give a message of encouragement to the faithful. He would sustain them with a firm assurance of their own safety while they contemplate the dreadful vision of impending evils.

We have already seen that John's description of his visions is very largely given in the symbolism and

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

even the phraseology of that strange class of Jewish literature which we now call "apocalyptic," and that sometimes he quotes passages from it with such little modification that they retain their Jewish character and it is difficult for us to see the Christian significance which he read into them. In the first eight verses of this chapter we have an example of this kind of thing. These verses appear to be a fragment of some Jewish apocalypse, now lost to us, which John uses with only slight alterations for his purposes. Probably this Jewish apocalypse was one of the elements which moulded his mystical experiences and in relating these experiences he lapses at this point into the use of the language which in his subconsciousness was the suggestion of certain features of his vision.

Four angels are seen holding in leash the four winds which represent the forces which are to bring disaster and destruction on the earth. Another angel arises from the East, the direction from which light and hope come, bearing the seal of the living God, and he commands the four angels to restrain the power of the winds until the servants of God are sealed in their foreheads. The prophet does not witness the sealing, but it takes place, and he hears the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand—twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The idea of the sealing may be traced back to Ezekiel<sup>1</sup> who speaks of a mark being placed upon the foreheads of the faithful to distinguish them from the wicked in order that they might be spared in the

<sup>1</sup> Ezek. ix. 4.

## TRIUMPHANT HOSTS

day of destruction, and it frequently recurs in Jewish writings. In the Psalms of Solomon, for instance, there is a reference to this method of discriminating between the righteous and the wicked amid the catastrophes of judgment : “ The flame of fire and the wrath against the unrighteous shall not touch him, when it goeth forth from the face of the Lord against sinners, to destroy all the substance of sinners, for the mark of God is upon the righteous that they may be saved. Famine and sword and pestilence shall be far from the righteous, for they shall flee away from the pious as men pursued in war.”<sup>1</sup>

The number of the sealed, twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes, evidently denotes the completeness of Israel and the careful enumeration, tribe by tribe, emphasizes that conception. Some difficulties arise about the order in which the tribes are mentioned. Judah heads the list instead of Levi, but that is an alteration in the order that a Christian would naturally make, Christ having descended from Judah. Then Dan is omitted altogether, Manasseh being substituted though Manasseh should logically be regarded as included with Ephraim in Joseph. The most probable explanation of this omission is that in the circles of Jewish thought from which this passage originally emanated Dan was regarded as the tribe from which Antichrist would come and therefore was dropped out of the true Israel altogether.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Psa. Sol. xv. 6-9.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that the explanation of the difficulty may be a copyist’s error in writing Man for Dan which was afterwards taken as an abbreviation of Manasseh.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

But now the purely Jewish element in John's vision, or the Jewish phraseology in which he tried to utter his vision, passes. The vision, or his memory of it, becomes clearer and fuller. It was no limited and racial redemption that had been revealed to him. Though a voice speaking from the traditions and memories which had shaped his subconscious mind might tell of a Jewish expectation for the future, when his eyes were fully opened to spiritual realities by the Spirit of God it was not the representatives of the twelve tribes that he saw, but an innumerable multitude from all nations and tribes and peoples and tongues.

A more prosaic interpretation of this passage is frequently adopted which regards the hundred and forty-four thousand as Jewish Christians and the great multitude as Gentiles. It seems logical enough, but to attempt to interpret this book logically is to essay a hopeless task. We are dealing with the work of a man of mystic temperament in the throes of divine inspiration. We are witnessing the struggle to preserve the new wine of the revelation given to him in what are often old bottles stored in the cellars of memory. Here the bottle seems to burst as he uses it, but the wine is not lost. Somehow the Spirit of God enables him to create the vessel which will hold the precious draught. And so we have the sublime description of the triumphant host arrayed in white robes, bearing the palm branches of victory, standing before the throne and the Lamb. They chant together a great song of praise ascribing their salvation to God and the Lamb. Then the angels standing around take up the strain,

## TRIUMPHANT HOSTS

confirming the praise of the redeemed with their “Amen,” and adding their own sevenfold doxology, while they prostrate themselves in adoration.

Who are these rejoicing conquerors? Anticipating that question the prophet records a dialogue between himself and one of the elders of his vision in which they are shown to be those who have come out of the great tribulation—the fiery trial of martyrdom which John expects to overtake swiftly the faithful to whom he writes. The white garments they wear are now interpreted not as in the previous chapter, where they signify the heavenly bodies given to the martyrs in anticipation of the resurrection, but as symbolizing the purity of faith and conduct with which they had emerged from their trial. But though they themselves had maintained this purity it was not of themselves; it was due to the sacrifice of Christ. All believers owed their redemption to that sacrifice, but the martyrs were identified with their Lord in a special sense by the sufferings they endured. It was the fact that the blood of the Lamb had been shed for them that enabled them to endure to the shedding of their own blood in their testimony to Him.

Now we turn to the matchless words which tell of the blessedness of these triumphant souls. Where in all literature shall we find such beauty and tenderness, such profound suggestion in such simple language, in so few lines, as the last three verses of this chapter? Few passages in the Bible have such a powerful hold of our affections and imaginations as this. All the separate features of the imagery may be traced to their sources in Old Testament prophets and

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

psalmists, but here they are woven together into a poetic unity which it is as foolish as unnecessary to break up by exposition and paraphrase. Commentators who see no more before them than an ancient text which they have to elucidate may limit all the wondrous promise to those whom John believed to be on the point of becoming martyrs for their faith, but we cannot refuse to regard the vision of blessedness which the Spirit of God enabled him to see and to describe as valid for all humble, earnest souls who accept the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, and who, amid the difficulties, disappointments and sorrows that they encounter in this life, look forward with hope and confidence. They know that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him, but such words as these come to them with refreshing suggestion, calming unrest and inspiring the serenity of assurance : “ He that sitteth on the throne shall spread his tabernacle over them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more ; neither shall the sun strike upon them, nor any heat : for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them unto fountains of waters of life : and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

## CHAPTER 8

### THE SOUNDING OF THE TRUMPETS

" Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord ;  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are  
stored ;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible, swift  
sword :  
    His truth is marching on.  
He hath sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call  
    retreat ;  
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat :  
Be swift, my soul, to answer Him ! be jubilant my feet !  
    Our God is marching on."

JULIA WARD HOWE.

As we come to the second of the three acts in the great drama of judgment it is inevitable that we should ask how their relation to each other is to be conceived.

When the seventh seal is broken we should naturally expect the climax of the judgments, but instead of that a fresh start is made and a new series of judgments is heralded by the sounding of the seven trumpets. Again, when the seventh trumpet is sounded the close of the development does not follow but the seven angels with the seven bowls come into view and it seems as if the whole process recommences. Some interpreters have regarded the three series as representing three successive stages of

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

history leading up to the final consummation. Others have considered that each of the three series is concerned with the same events, only setting them forth in somewhat different ways to emphasize and enforce the message. Another view combines the idea of progress with that of recapitulation, suggesting the illustration of the ascent of a tower by a spiral staircase. Each turn brings you to a view of the same landscape, but every time you come afresh to it the view is widened by the fact that you regard it from a greater height. This conception is attractive to the modern mind which finds much to support it in history. We can trace cycles of events in which everything seems to work up to a terrible climax, but the crisis comes and passes. It proves not to be the expected end. The forces which seemed to be bringing the final cataclysm group themselves in fresh ways and express themselves in new forms and another stage of the march to the ultimate goal is begun.

It is difficult, however, to believe that such an idea was in the mind of the prophet. It is much more natural to regard the three series as representing different visions in which images and symbols reappear in changing combinations and with varying significance, but all combining to convey one great message of judgment. An illustration may be drawn from a kaleidoscope in which the same pieces of coloured glass produce different patterns with each change that is made in the position of the instrument. Or, perhaps, the conception may be helpfully compared with that form of musical composition known as a fugue, in which the notes of the

## THE SOUNDING OF THE TRUMPETS

original theme or themes continually reappear in different parts and undergo concurrent development with fresh harmonies.

We return now to the breaking of the seventh seal and the appearance of the seven angels with trumpets. But before the angels continue the action of the drama, by sounding their trumpets, there is a pause. For about the space of half an hour the very praises of heaven are hushed and then in the silence, tense with expectation of the judgments to come, the prayers of the suffering saints come up before the throne of God. They rise like smoke from the golden altar<sup>1</sup> and with them there is mingled much incense from the golden censer of an angel whose duty it was to present the prayers of the righteous. Here we have an instance of a purely Jewish belief still lingering in the Christian mind despite the fact that Christ had been revealed as the great Intercessor.<sup>2</sup> But the truth of abiding validity is that the passionate cry for help, deliverance and even vengeance goes up to God. There it is purged and purified from all that is selfish and unworthy and made to contribute to the fulfilment of the agelong purpose.

"Never a sigh of passion or of pity,  
Never a wail for weakness or for wrong,  
Has not its archive in the angels' city,  
Finds not its echo in the endless song."<sup>3</sup>

The prayers offered by the saints in this vision are answered. The censer which had been used by the

<sup>1</sup> The imagery here is different from that of the earlier vision.  
*Cf. Rev. v. 8.*

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Heb. vii. 25.

<sup>3</sup> F. W. H. Myers, *St Paul.*

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

angel who presented them to God is now used to cast the fire, with which the sacrifice of prayer had been consumed, upon the earth as a manifestation of judgment and thunders and voices and lightnings and an earthquake follow. The prayers were for vengeance and this answer to them is the prelude to the series of judgments upon the impenitent which the sounding of the trumpets will announce.

The first four angels stand forth and sound their trumpets in turn and in response to each there follow terrible calamities in the natural world. In the description given of them there are reminiscences of the plagues of Egypt and also of those volcanic phenomena with which a dweller in Patmos would be familiar. There is a rain of hail and fire mingled with red dust making it look like blood. A burning mountain falls into the sea and turns it into blood. A great star falls like a burning torch upon the rivers and fountains and poisons them. The light of sun, moon and stars fails. But in each case the catastrophe is only partial; one-third of the trees and grass are burned; one-third of the sea is turned into blood and one-third of the fish and the ships destroyed. Again it is a third of the waters which become wormwood, bringing death to those who drink from them, and the light of the sun, moon and stars is diminished in the same proportion.

The judgments announced by these four trumpets refer entirely to physical disasters. They are not to be allegorized nor need any attempt be made to harmonize them with the series of the seals. Compared with those they seem somewhat conventional,

## THE SOUNDING OF THE TRUMPETS

but even the visions of an inspired prophet may not always have the same impressiveness or show the same grandeur of imagery. But after these four trumpets have sounded there is a heightening of tone and an intensification of imaginative power in the description of the vision.

An eagle<sup>1</sup> is seen flying in mid-heaven and this bird, so strong of wing and swift of flight, is recognized in similar literature as a messenger of woe. In a voice that all may hear he proclaims woe to the world because of the judgments the remaining trumpets are to announce.

Then the fifth angel sounds his trumpet and a star falls from heaven to earth to whom is given the key of the abyss. For the interpretation of this weird imagery we must go to the apocalyptic literature of the Jews. There we find that a fallen star signifies a fallen angel<sup>2</sup> and that the abyss is the great pit, supposed to be located somewhere in the middle of the earth, where such beings are imprisoned. One quotation from the Book of Enoch may be given to illustrate the conception. It describes the punishment of the fallen angels by the archangels : “ And I saw one of those four who had come forth first, and he seized that first star which had fallen from the heaven, and bound it hand and foot and cast it into an abyss : now that abyss was narrow and deep, and horrible and dark.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The reading “ angel ” in the Authorized Version is probably due to a copyist’s confusion of this verse with xiv. 6.

<sup>2</sup> The influence of Babylonian and Chaldean astrology may be recognized here. The same influence affected Greek thought and there we find the stars identified with gods by the fourth century B.C.

<sup>3</sup> Book of Enoch, lxxxviii. 1.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

In his vision John sees this abyss unlocked by the fallen angel and when the covering is removed a great smoke goes up from it darkening all the air and obscuring the light of the sun. Then, out of the smoke, a swarm of monstrous locusts appears. The appearance of these creatures reminds us of the vision of the prophet Joel, but he was speaking of the familiar pest which works such havoc in the fields and gardens. John's vision is not of such. What he sees are infernal demons which hurt men, not trees and grass. In general appearance they remind him of locusts, but they have human faces with long hair and look as if they are wearing crowns of gold. Their teeth are like those of lions, they have breast-plates as it were of iron, and the rustling of their wings sounds like the rushing of chariots and horses into battle. They have tails like scorpions and in them lies their terrible power to hurt men. All who had not the seal of God in their foreheads were tormented by them and so great was the torture they inflicted that their victims longed for death though it did not come. Like plagues of ordinary locusts this visitation lasted for five months. And these terrible beings were an ordered host under the direction of a king who was the angel of the abyss. He is called Abaddon in Hebrew, or Apollyon in Greek, both words meaning Destroyer.

The sounding of the sixth trumpet is the signal for another visitation more monstrous and awful still. Like the previous conception this has a starting-point in the thought of a calamity that it was quite natural to fear. The reference to the unloosing of four angels at the river Euphrates and the vast

## THE SOUNDING OF THE TRUMPETS

army of horsemen set in motion by their release suggests an invasion of Parthians such as is alluded to in the description of the white horse which appears at the breaking of the first seal.<sup>1</sup> But just as the ordinary plague of locusts is developed into something much more terrible, so here the suggestion of an army of Parthian cavalry is developed into an innumerable host of demon-warriors riding dragon-horses. The vastness of the army is indicated by the mention of the inconceivable number of two hundred millions. The warriors are of terrifying aspect, their breastplates suggesting fire and smoke and brimstone. More awful still are their steeds. With heads like lions and tails like serpents having heads with which they bite men, they breathe fire and smoke and brimstone and with their breath they destroy a third part of the men on the earth.

The fantastic imagery of these last two judgments cannot be interpreted legitimately so as to make any real appeal to the modern mind. Many attempts have been made, but all ignore the fact that John's vision assumes a whole world of ideas which is utterly remote from our thought to-day. He is not here employing symbols to represent historical occurrences or psychological experiences. He is using his imaginative power to describe evil spirits, or demons, who are intensely real beings to him. With the Jews, as with many primitive peoples, it was customary to attribute all kinds of moral and physical evils to personal agencies. And by the time Christ came a belief had grown up in a vast and highly-organized realm of evil spirits which was con-

<sup>1</sup> See p. 54.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

tinually at war with God and His purposes. These beings were regarded partly as fallen angels, partly as the offspring of the unhallowed union of such with the daughters of men.<sup>1</sup> Our Lord did not deny this belief though He gave such a revelation of the grace and power of God as should release men from the fear it inspired. The belief lingered through many centuries of the Christian era and indeed it is only the growth of modern scientific conceptions, coupled with a clearer perception of the implications of the gospel, that has destroyed it for us to-day. We must remember that these ideas were still vigorous in the minds of the prophet John and the people to whom he ministered. But, like St Paul,<sup>2</sup> he believed that Christ had conquered the demon world and though He still permitted its existence, He controlled and directed it to the accomplishment of His purpose. So when the Lamb breaks the seventh seal, out of which the seven trumpets come, part of the judgment that follows is executed by demons. That they should take the form of monstrous locusts or riders of lion-headed, serpent-tailed horses was quite in accord with current conceptions. Serpents, scorpions, mosquitoes and hybrid monsters, such as birds with the heads of lions or donkeys, were forms in which demons were commonly supposed to appear. And the enormous number of these beings is a characteristic feature of Jewish and all kindred systems of demonology. We see then that familiar Jewish ideas form the stuff out of which this vision is woven, but it is an immeasurable advance on them that the demons are subject to the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gen. vi. 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Col. ii. 15.

## THE SOUNDING OF THE TRUMPETS

authority of Christ and that they are not allowed to hurt those who have His seal on their foreheads.

It is a simple fact of history that Christ has delivered men from the terror of these supernatural enemies and that deliverance is still wrought where the gospel is proclaimed to peoples whose lives have been haunted by similar fears. A medical missionary working in the Congo to-day writes of the African native as he knows him and says : " Christianity is for him the light that shines amid the darkness of his fears ; it assures him that he is not in the power of nature spirits, or fetishes, and that no human being has any sinister power over another, since the will of God really controls everything that goes on in the world.

' I lay in cruel bondage  
Thou cam'st and mad'st me free.'

These words from Paul Gerhardt's Advent hymn express better than any others what Christianity means for the primitive man. That is again and again the thought that fills my mind when I take part in a service on a mission station."<sup>1</sup>

So these terrible visitations pass before the mystic eye of the prophet. They have been announced by trumpets and that very fact is a suggestion that they are meant as fearful warning. But the warning is not heeded. Those who escape do not repent of their idolatry and devil worship, their murders, sorceries, fornications and thefts.

It is an old story often repeated. Calamities and

<sup>1</sup> Schweitzer, *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*, p. 154. Cf. Glover, *Christian Tradition and its Verification*, Lec. 5; *Jesus in the Experience of Men*, chap. 1.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

catastrophes have visited men careless of God and His will. Fearful retribution has followed upon great moral evils. Men with the seal of God in their foreheads have recognized the divine hand in these things and thought that when God's judgments were in the earth the inhabitants would learn righteousness. But men are not terrified into lasting repentance. It is not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire that God speaks to win the hearts of men, but in the still, small voice. Did John realize all the implications of the fact he sets forth so clearly in this book that victory is to the Lamb ?

## CHAPTER 9

### RENEWED INSPIRATION AND ASSURANCE

" For every fiery prophet in old times,  
And all the sacred madness of the bard,  
When God made music through them, could but speak  
His music by the framework and the chord."

TENNYSON.

THE progressive development of the drama is again interrupted at the close of the ninth chapter and is not resumed until the fourteenth verse of the eleventh chapter. This second interlude presents considerable difficulties of interpretation.

We must remember that John was not writing as a literary artist who must carefully select his material, rigidly pruning all excrescences and redundancies and shaping the whole into harmonious proportions. He was a prophet with a prophet's message to deliver and he could not sacrifice anything relevant to that message to the form in which he sought to express it. The visionary experiences which had come to him and the fresh significance they had revealed in some familiar passages of earlier apocalyptic writing could not all be put into the drama of the Seals, Trumpets and Bowls. So these interludes are found which confuse the literary form of the book, but nevertheless serve to emphasize its message and

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

to increase the spiritual stimulus it was meant to bring to the suffering Church.

The tenth chapter describes a fresh endowment of prophetic inspiration which is given in view of the tremendous revelations that are to come. John sees a strong angel descending from heaven arrayed with a cloud. His face shines like the sun and the light that streams from it on to the cloud forms a rainbow which encircles his head like a halo. His legs<sup>1</sup> are like pillars of fire and he plants one foot on the sea and the other on the earth. He utters a great cry, like the roaring of a lion and then the seven thunders speak. By "the seven thunders" another series of judgments, similar to those connected with the seven seals and the seven trumpets, seems to be meant, but the prophet is told that these are not to be recorded. Then the angel swears a solemn oath that there shall be no more delay, but as soon as the seventh trumpet sounds, the divine purpose, announced through the prophets, shall be fulfilled.

From the first John has noticed a little book open in the hand of the angel. Now the angel tells him to take it and eat it and says that it will be sweet to taste but bitter to digest. He obeys and finds it as the angel had said. Then the inspiration to prophesy is renewed.

As in the vision described in the fifth chapter so also in this vision the symbolism is partly determined by subconscious recollections of the prophecy of Ezekiel.<sup>2</sup> In the first case the feature due to Ezekiel

<sup>1</sup> Dr Charles suggests that as the Hebrew word for "foot" may also mean "leg", John, thinking in Hebrew, has transferred this meaning to the Greek word.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek. ii. 9-iii. 3.

## RENEWED INSPIRATION AND ASSURANCE

is the fullness of the roll which is “written within and on the back.” In this case it is the command to eat the book and the discovery of its sweetness to the taste. But though Ezekiel’s book was full of “lamentations and mourning and woe” he says nothing of its bitterness in digestion which John emphasizes. Ezekiel was content to dwell on the delight and satisfaction of receiving the message of God. John, too, was conscious of that, yet he also felt keenly the burden of having to deliver a message of judgment and woe. “But,” as Milton puts it, “when God commands to take the trumpet, and blow a dolorous or jarring blast, it lies not in man’s will what he shall say, or what he shall conceal.”<sup>1</sup>

As to the specific contents of this little book there is no need to ask. It is altogether arbitrary and unnecessary to press the symbolism of the vision so far as to regard this book as containing actually what follows, whether in the next or succeeding chapters. The purpose of the vision is satisfied by the suggestion of a renewed experience of inspiration. By his statement of the mingled emotions which the reception of the revelation aroused in him John seeks further to prepare his readers for the anguish of the conflict of which he has yet to speak.

In the remainder of this interlude we have an instance of the use of some fragments of earlier apocalyptic writing in the manner already described in chapter seven.

The first two verses of the eleventh chapter de-

<sup>1</sup> *The Reason of Church-Government urged against Prelaty, Book II. Introduction.*

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

scribe the measuring of the Temple, the altar and the worshippers. The outer court is exempted from the measurement and is to be given over to the Gentiles, together with the holy city, to be trodden under foot three and a half years. Evidently this prophecy originally foretold the preservation of the inner court of the Temple when Jerusalem should be destroyed and it must therefore be dated earlier than the year 70 A.D., when both Temple and City were destroyed by the Romans. John was writing twenty-five years later. Why, then, should this fragment, probably from some patriot belonging to the "Zealot" party, emerge into his consciousness and be used to convey his message? To trace the association of ideas which brought that about is impossible, but to see the significance of the words in their present connexion is not too difficult. The Temple with its altar and worshippers is taken as a symbol of the Christian Church and its security is promised in the great conflict with the kingdom of Antichrist, which is immediately to be described. The measuring here suggests protection and preservation, just as the sealing of the one hundred and forty-four thousand does in the seventh chapter.

The next eleven verses are probably also from some earlier Jewish apocalyptic writing, but no direct relation to the preceding two verses is apparent. For the same length of time as Jerusalem was occupied by the Gentiles, two witnesses are to prophesy, clothed in sackcloth. They are identified with the two olive trees of Zechariah's vision by which that prophet understood Zerubbabel and

## RENEWED INSPIRATION AND ASSURANCE

Joshua.<sup>1</sup> Here, however, judging from the miracles attributed to them in the sixth verse, Elijah and Moses seem to have been intended, though an early tradition substitutes Enoch for Moses. These two, of course, are representative of the Law and the Prophets and as such we recognize the significance of their appearance in the narrative of the Transfiguration. Though their ministry is authenticated by miraculous signs of power they are at last overcome by the Beast from the abyss and their dead bodies lie in the streets of Jerusalem. Their enemies rejoice over their defeat, but rejoicing is soon turned into consternation. The witnesses are restored to life and summoned to heaven by a great voice while their enemies look on. A great earthquake follows, destroying one-tenth of the city and seven thousand of its inhabitants. The rest are overwhelmed by fear and give glory to God.

All this is Jewish and evidently belongs to the period before the fall of Jerusalem. Why, then, did John use it in expounding his own visions ? What new interpretation did he place on it for his Christian readers ?

As in the previous interlude, given in the seventh chapter, John is anticipating what he has yet to reveal and preparing the minds of his readers for it. He is about to describe his vision of Antichrist as the Beast from the abyss, identifying it with Rome. This brings into his mind the earlier prophecy in which Antichrist is described under the same figure but identified with Jerusalem, and he quotes that because there is something in it which corresponds

<sup>1</sup> Zech. iv.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

to his own vision of the things to come. Doubtless he regards that earlier prophecy as fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem. The witnesses for God have been destroyed ; their enemies have mocked them and rejoiced at their overthrow ; but the faithful witnesses have been raised from the dead and taken up to heaven. Perhaps he thinks of Christ as the chief of all the witnesses and their forerunner in heaven, for he adds to the original Jewish writing, in the eighth verse, “ where their Lord was crucified.” And now as he is about to describe a greater manifestation of Antichrist and the sufferings and persecutions which faithful witnesses to Christ must endure, this quotation suggests just the considerations which will comfort the hearts of his readers. They are witnesses for Christ to their own generation and their reception will not be more favourable than that of the two described in this passage. They must expect to be rejected, persecuted and even killed. But God will vindicate them. For the martyrs there is a glorious resurrection ; for their enemies terrible judgment by which many will be destroyed and others moved to repentance.

After this digression John resumes the drama of judgment at the point which he had reached with the end of the ninth chapter. The fourteenth verse of the eleventh chapter makes the transition to the sounding of the seventh trumpet which introduces the triumph of the Kingdom of Christ. As in the case of the breaking of the seventh seal no judgments immediately follow, but, instead of the silence which succeeded in the former case, voices are heard chanting a song of victory. The voices are

## RENEWED INSPIRATION AND ASSURANCE

probably those of the living creatures, and then the elders take up the strain, developing it into an anthem of praise which celebrates both God's rewards to His servants and His judgment of His enemies.

The heavenly song is an anticipation of the divine triumph. In the progress of events in time the consummation is not yet reached. The seventh trumpet has sounded but, as in the case of the breaking of the seventh seal, the end of the drama has not come. The scene is set for further action. The heavenly temple is opened, the ark of the covenant is seen within it and, as on Sinai of old, the presence of God is revealed amid the awe-inspiring phenomena of storm and earthquake. Presently the third series of seven—the pouring of the seven bowls—will begin, but before that other visions are described which are of the greatest importance to the prophet's message, and they may be regarded as the third interlude in the progress of the drama.

## CHAPTER 10

### THE DRAGON, THE WOMAN AND THE CHILD

"Have we got, or shall we ever get, to more than a symbolic explanation of the great world drama—the conflict of Good and Evil? As compared with the Babylonian myth of Marduk and Tiamat and earlier legends, the apocalyptic view is inspired by a far deeper moral and religious sense, and its true values are to be looked for in the depth of the human spirit and not in the understanding. Take it as sober phenomenal reality and it must prove, as it has so largely proved, an obstacle to intelligence and to a true comprehension and use of the natural order. Take it as an effort of the spiritual life to express itself in the imagery of a certain place and time, and it still serves its purpose of registering that spiritual attitude, of fixing a direction of the will, a character of sentiment—an entire 'psychosis'."—G. TYRRELL.

THE twelfth chapter of the Book of the Revelation brings us to one of the crucial difficulties in its interpretation and it will be well for us, as we approach it, to set clearly before our minds some considerations suggested in our introductory chapter.

It cannot be too often repeated that this book is the result of a series of visions which came to a man of genuine mystic temperament. That does not rule out the inquiry as to the "sources" of the ideas and symbols which form the content of the visions. "The visions of the mystics," says Dr Pratt, "are

## THE DRAGON, THE WOMAN AND CHILD

determined in content by their belief, and are due to the dream imagination working upon the mass of theological material which fills the mind.”<sup>1</sup> But the way in which the imagination of the mystic, under the influence of the Spirit of God, will deal with the “theological material which fills the mind” is likely to be very different from the way in which a literary man will deal with that same material filling the shelves of a library! If some of our scholars who have given such long and devoted study to discovering what the theological material was out of which the visions of this book were created, would add to their invaluable literary labours some study of the psychology of the mystic, they might find simpler solutions, in some cases at least, of the problems which perplex them and their readers. Of course we do not assume that the book was written in a state of ecstasy, so there is room for the use of ordinary literary methods. But the man who wrote the book was the mystic who had seen the visions and his purpose was not to produce a work of literary art, but to describe those visions to his readers and to help them to realize the message of hope and encouragement they contained for the days of trial and persecution through which they had to pass.

We shall find no adequate solution of the problems this chapter presents so long as we suppose it to be a kind of allegory in which the writer has worked up some very incongruous material extracted from some unknown books which happened to be included in his library. But let us suppose the “material” to

<sup>1</sup> *The Religious Consciousness*, p. 403.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

be not in his library but in his subconscious mind, stored there as a result of past reading or early Jewish training, recalled and refashioned under the conditions of ecstatic vision and afterwards remembered, not without some vagueness, as he sought to convey in words the truth he had perceived by his inspired imagination. In that case the difficulties are reduced to their proper proportions and recognized to be the inevitable limitations which must be accepted in any attempt at interpretation.

No doubt the "theological material" of this vision came to John through a Jewish channel, but in origin it was pagan. There are stories in the mythology of Babylon, Persia, Egypt and Greece which bear a close resemblance to this story of the Dragon, the Woman and the Child. Probably they all go back to a primitive myth describing the conflict between light and darkness, order and chaos. Some Jewish writer took this myth, adapted it and spiritualized it to suggest the religious history of his people and their expectation of the Messiah. In this form John had become familiar with it at some time and in his vision it reappears, bearing still the marks of its heathen origin and Jewish adaptation, but with a Christian meaning superimposed upon it. The Woman represents the spiritual Israel from which the Messiah is born and of which the Christian Church is the later development. The fact that she is arrayed with the sun and has the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars is a survival of the original form of the myth, highly significant there but not adding anything to John's

## THE DRAGON, THE WOMAN AND CHILD

present conception. The seven-headed Dragon with ten horns and seven diadems is the embodiment of the power of evil, Satan, the supreme antagonist of God and His Christ. The blood-red colour of the Dragon, his seven heads and his horns are all features traceable to the mythological origin of the conception, but the *ten* horns, instead of seven, which we should naturally expect, are probably due to the influence of Daniel<sup>1</sup> and the seven crowns seem to be an addition, perhaps suggesting that the power of evil is to work through kings or emperors. The Dragon draws a third of the stars of heaven by the lashing of his tail and casts them to the earth. In the original nature myth this would be an explanation of certain astronomical phenomena, such as eclipses and falling stars. In the Jewish adaptation of the myth it would doubtless refer to the war in heaven in which Satan and the angels he seduced from their high allegiance were cast down to the earth. It is this idea of Satan as the enemy of all good that John emphasizes, and which is further shown by the threat to devour the Child about to be born. Now the reason for the recurrence of this "theological material" to the mind of the prophet in his vision comes clearly into view. The Child that is born is the Christ. His destiny as ruler of the nations is asserted. The power of evil cannot destroy Him. He is caught up to God and His throne. Nothing is said about His career on earth; no mention is made even of His cross and passion; there is only the allusion to His birth and ascension. This may be due to the Jewish form of the story as

<sup>1</sup> Dan. vii. 24.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

John had originally heard it, but no more is needed for the purpose of this vision. The meaning and message of it centres in the Dragon's persecution of the Woman.

But at this point the main action of the vision is suspended,<sup>1</sup> while a sort of explanatory episode is introduced which has already been suggested by the reference to the stars drawn from heaven by the Dragon's tail. It does not seem difficult to realize the sequence of ideas when we recall the action of our own minds in reverie. Or if we objectify the process, we might illustrate it from the cinematograph method by which some past episode in the life of the characters is thrown on the screen to explain the action which has just been, or is just about to be, represented. So the reason for the Dragon's presence on earth, his menace to the Child and his persecution of the Woman is shown in the war in heaven in which Michael and his angels overthrow the Dragon and his angels and cast them down to the earth.

Here we have a conception frequently alluded to in Jewish literature. In the *Book of the Secrets of Enoch*,<sup>2</sup> God says to Enoch : " And one from out the order of angels, having turned away with the order that was under him, conceived an impossible thought, to place his throne higher than the clouds above the earth, that he might become equal in rank to my power. And I threw him out from the height with his angels and he was flying in the air continuously

<sup>1</sup> xii. 6, is not part of the vision ; it is an anticipatory summary of xii. 13-17, which completes the vision.

<sup>2</sup> Assigned to the period A.D. 1-50, by Dr Charles.

## THE DRAGON, THE WOMAN AND CHILD

above the bottomless.”<sup>1</sup> In a much later book, called *The Life of Adam and Eve*, the archangel Michael is associated with the devil’s condemnation, and in some earlier Jewish form of the story, familiar to John, he must have figured as executing the divine sentence.

This furnished the material for the prophet’s vision. But the Christian prophet is not interested in Michael ; his thought is full of Christ. And his vision is not concerned only with the past. In it past, present and future are blended into one, and he hears a great voice proclaiming a victory not merely in heaven but on earth. It is the prophecy of the victory which the faithful to whom he writes will achieve, in the terrible persecution he anticipates, as a consequence of the shedding of Christ’s blood and by their readiness to shed their own. So heaven may rejoice that the strife with evil is for ever ended there, but it is woe for the earth and sea where the fury of the devil is to rage for a short time.

Now the “great wrath” of the devil is manifested as the main action of the vision is resumed and the further history of the Woman, after the Child was rapt to heaven, is told. She flies into the wilderness to escape the persecution of the Dragon, aided by two wings of the great eagle which are given her, and there she is nourished for  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years or 1260 days —the usual numerical symbol for a broken period of time. There the Dragon seeks to destroy her by a river of water he casts out of his mouth, but the earth is her ally and swallows up the water. So the Dragon goes off in his rage to make war with

<sup>1</sup> *Secrets of Enoch*, xxix. 4 and 5.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

the rest of her children who keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus.

The eagle's wings and the river of water are details which belong to the original form of the story. In traditional mythology we often find the eagle opposed to the serpent and the primeval dragon was frequently represented as a sea monster. In the Jewish form of the story known to John it may be that there was a reference to the flight of certain Jews, after the fall of Jerusalem, to Jabneh, or Jewish Christians may have seen in it an allusion to the flight of some of their number to Pella. But in any case these details have no special significance in John's vision. They simply form part of a picture which, taken as a whole, suggests the experience the Church had to pass through after the ascension of Christ and prepares the way for the visions of the persecution about to overtake those for whom the book was intended.

If we seek for a message for to-day in this chapter we must find it in the reiteration of the central theme of the whole book. Earthly happenings can only be understood when seen against a heavenly background. The facts of history are rooted in the unseen spiritual world. The warfare with evil, so fierce, prolonged and bitter in our experience, is part of a larger conflict. Viewing the strife from the little corner of the great battlefield that we see, it often seems that the issue trembles in the balance and we are afraid. But if our eyes are only open to the supreme spiritual realities we shall recognize that the campaign has already been won and it only remains for the victory to be completed in detail on

## THE DRAGON, THE WOMAN AND CHILD

all parts of the great battlefield. The machinations of evil on the earth are the rage of a defeated and discredited power who knows "he hath but a short time." Let us remember that, and with hope and courage fight on till the victory won in heaven be realized on earth.

## CHAPTER II

### THE TWO BEASTS

"Inside there is a chapel covered with frescoes by Luca Signorelli. . . . The main subjects are, the End of all Things, the Apocalyptic Woes, Resurrection, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell; but the remarkable feature is that this is prefaced by the appearance and triumphs of Antichrist. Antichrist is no dreadful monster, but a most grand and dignified figure, with just a faint suggestion of Him of whom he is the rival; noble in look and form till you look into the face, and then the wickedness discloses itself: and he is surrounded with groups of the same stateliness and beauty, and with a profusion of rich and beautiful things, but with nothing that openly suggests badness—only worldliness and its temptations, till you look to the background, and there, persecutions and bloodshed are going on."—Dean CHURCH (from a letter describing a visit to the Cathedral at Orvieto).

THE Dragon described in the twelfth chapter now summons to his aid two monstrous powers through which he will prosecute his purpose. As John stands in vision on the shore<sup>1</sup> of Patmos, he gazes westward and sees a Beast coming up from the sea. The form of the Beast reproduces some features of the four beasts of Daniel's vision.<sup>2</sup> It has ten horns like Daniel's fourth beast and seven heads as Daniel's four have between them. Features of the leopard,

<sup>1</sup> The reading of the Authorized Version is adopted here in preference to the Revised Version.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Dan. vii.

## THE TWO BEASTS

the bear and the lion also correspond to Daniel's first three beasts. But the ten diadems on the ten horns, the names of blasphemy upon the heads and the scar of the deadly wound upon one of the heads are elements in the description which have no connexion with Daniel, and therefore must have special and immediate significance for the prophet.

Daniel's beasts represented four great empires which were to be followed by the Kingdom of "one like unto a son of man," and John's Beast is also a great empire—the Empire of Rome. In the seventeenth chapter the seven heads signify the seven hills on which the city of Rome was built, and also seven kings, while the ten horns represent ten kings. It may be that this interpretation is anticipated here, but it is not necessary to assume that. The Dragon also has seven heads and ten horns but no particular reference to circumstances or individuals before the mind of the prophet seems to be suggested in that case. In the same way these details in the description of the Beast need not at this point be regarded as significant. The general idea the vision suggests is clear enough without looking forward to the later development of the symbolism.

The fact that the Beast has the diadems upon his horns while the Dragon had them on his heads is not important. Probably the change is simply due to the need of making more visible "the names of blasphemy" which are borne by the heads. These unquestionably are the divine titles ascribed to the Roman Emperors. We have already described them in our second chapter and shown how the great

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

conflict with which this book is concerned arose directly out of the refusal of Christians to acknowledge their claim.

The head with the death wound has been variously interpreted but, bearing in mind the problem of the number of the Beast which we shall deal with later, we do not hesitate to connect it with the vague expectations of a return of Nero which were current in Greece and Asia Minor at the time John was writing.

Nero died by his own hand, or that of a freedman, in the year 68, but so deep and vivid was the impression that his infamous reign had made on the minds of men that many refused to believe he was dead. Edicts in his name still appeared and only a year after his death a plausible adventurer impersonated him and raised an unsuccessful rebellion against Rome. The legend of Nero's survival, however, was not destroyed. It was asserted that he had taken refuge with the Parthians and would presently return from the East to avenge himself on his enemies. A second pretender appeared about the year 80 and a third about 88. In a section of the *Sibylline Oracles*<sup>1</sup> written about A.D. 80 the flight of Nero to the Parthians is referred to and his

<sup>1</sup> The original *Sibylline Oracles* was a collection of verses written in Greek, supposed to be the utterances of certain inspired women known as "Sibyls," or prophetesses, which gained great influence in Rome and was consulted on occasions of special perplexity as a means of supernatural enlightenment. This collection was destroyed in the burning of the Capitol in 82 B.C. The *Sibylline Oracles* we now possess is a compilation made by Jewish and Christian writers between 160 B.C. and the fifth century A.D., the original impulse of which was the desire of certain Jews to propagate their faith among the Gentiles, borrowing the revered authority of the Sibyl for this purpose.

## THE TWO BEASTS

return anticipated. “And then from Italy a great king, like a fugitive slave, shall flee unseen, unheard of, over the passage of the Euphrates; when he shall dare even the hateful pollution of a mother’s murder and many other things beside, venturing so far with wicked hand. And many for the throne of Rome shall dye the ground with their blood, when he has run away beyond the Parthian land. . . . And to the west shall come the strife of gathering war, and the exile from Rome, brandishing a mighty sword, crossing the Euphrates with many myriads.”<sup>1</sup>

As time wore on and Nero did not appear, it came to be believed that he had died but would return from the dead and Jewish and early Christian writers began to identify him with the Antichrist whose coming they expected. In a later section of the book quoted above, we see this identification taking place. “There shall come from the ends of the earth a matricide fleeing and devising sharp-edged plans in his mind. He shall ruin all the earth and gain all power, and surpass all men in the cunning of his mind. That for which he perished he shall seize at once. And he shall destroy many men and great tyrants, and shall burn all men as none other ever did.”<sup>2</sup> In some such form as this the idea was known to John and when, in his vision, the Beast, representing the Empire, has one of his heads “as though smitten unto death: and his death-stroke was healed,” we have a hint of that identification of Rome with the returned Nero as the Antichrist which

<sup>1</sup> *Sibylline Oracles*, Book IV., lines 119ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Book V., lines 363ff.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

will be more fully developed as the record and interpretation of the visions proceed.<sup>1</sup>

Of course it must be clearly realized that what we have just been discussing is only the source of the ideas and conceptions which gave the form to John's vision. There is no need to assume that he believed in the return of Nero in person. It may well be that he recognized in Domitian the individual in whom the persecuting power of the Empire, once focused in Nero, would be revived, and that he expected his readers to interpret his vision in this way. The essential point is that the Beast from the sea signified the Roman Empire as the representative of the Dragon, the great opponent of the Church on earth as Satan was the protagonist of Christ in heaven. In other words, the Beast is the devil's Messiah, or the Antichrist. Men are overcome with astonishment as they contemplate the power of the Beast. They yield to his claim for divine honours and, worshipping him, they worship the Dragon whose deputy he is. Emperor-worship to the Christian conscience was the worship of the devil.

To this universal worship of the Beast the only exceptions are the Christians—every one whose name has been written from the foundation of the world<sup>2</sup> in the Book of Life of the Lamb that hath

<sup>1</sup> In this connexion it may be noted that in the section of the *Ascension of Isaiah* which is of Christian origin and which probably dates from the beginning of the second century, the Antichrist is announced as Beliar, who will "descend from his firmament in the likeness of a man, a lawless king, the slayer of his mother." See Burkitt, *Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> It seems best to connect "from the foundation of the world" with "written," as in xvii. 8 (cf. Eph. i. 4; Matt. xxv. 34), but it is possible to connect the phrase with "slain," and the idea thus suggested is supported by 1 Peter i. 19 and 20.

## THE TWO BEASTS

been slain. They would, however, have to endure persecution and martyrdom as a result of their defiance. It was given to the Beast to make war with the saints and overcome them. Let there be no mistake about that, adds the prophet. "If any man is for captivity, into captivity he goeth ; if any man is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he must be killed."<sup>1</sup> No one will be able to escape his destiny. Yet by the whole message of his book he summons them to endurance. It is through such suffering that their patience and faith will be manifest.

Now the vision proceeds and another Beast appears rising from the land. He has two horns like a lamb, but speaks like a dragon and he exercises the full authority of the first Beast in his presence and makes all the earth worship him. He does wonderful miracles, even making fire come down from heaven, and by means of these he deceives those who dwell on earth. Then he induces them to make an image of the first Beast and to that image he imparts breath and makes it speak. Those who will not worship the image he causes to be put to death, and all who do worship it he has marked, on the right hand or the forehead, with the name or number of the Beast, and only they can buy or sell.

Here we have the symbol of the local authorities of the Roman provinces to which all matters concerning the worship of the Emperor were relegated (as described in our second chapter), and which had

<sup>1</sup> This is the rendering found in one of the oldest MSS. and is probably to be preferred to that adopted in either Authorized Version or Revised Version (cf. Jer. xv. 2).

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

become in effect, the imperial priesthood. It is a native power that is indicated, and therefore the second Beast rises from the land instead of from the sea, as the first does. In appearance this Beast is not so formidable as the first, but though its horns are the horns of a lamb, its voice is the voice of a dragon. It is akin to the false prophets which come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. The apparent miracles wrought by this Beast need not detain us. Such things as bringing fire from heaven and causing images to speak were easy tricks for the magicians of that day and were part of the means by which many cults appealed to the crowd in a credulous and unscientific age.

Part of the authority of the first Beast exercised by the second is shown in the killing of those who will not worship the image of the Beast, the statue of the deified Emperor, but another method of persecution is also adopted. This is evidently what we should call a form of boycott, but exactly what was signified by the mark of the Beast on the hand or forehead is not clear from such knowledge as we have of contemporary history. There is no need to assume that because the mark was actually impressed upon the person in the vision, that it was so in real life, but there may well have been some token given to those who fulfilled the obligation of worshipping the Emperor. We know that in later times of persecution certificates were given to those who fulfilled the regulations, and it may be that, in their zeal for the imperial cult, these provincial councils in Asia had issued something of the kind and had encouraged a trade boycott of all who did not qualify for these

## THE TWO BEASTS

certificates. Another suggestion is that the mark of the Beast referred to the seal bearing the Emperor's name, which was affixed to various documents, including contracts and deeds of sale.<sup>1</sup> Anyhow it is unquestionable that this feature of John's vision refers to some effort that was being made to track down Christians who had as yet escaped martyrdom, and to make it impossible for them to secure a livelihood.

At the close of the account of this vision John gives one detail of what he had seen and challenges the ingenuity of his readers to interpret it. Men have been accepting that challenge ever since, but they are still at variance on the subject! The mark he had seen on the hand or forehead of the worshippers was the name of the Beast expressed in a number and that number was 666.

In Hebrew and Greek the letters of the alphabet have a numerical value and so the letters composing any name can be added up and expressed as a number. The problem here then is to find the name, the letters of which, when regarded as numerals, add up to 666. Very many names will fit and innumerable futile guesses have been made. According to the methods of interpretation which we are applying to this book, it is obvious that the name required must be that of some one who was before the mind of the prophet and his readers. We have already seen reason to think that he identifies the Beast in some way with Nero, regarding that Emperor as the most characteristic exponent of the persecuting power of the Empire, and using the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, pp. 241ff.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

widespread belief in his return to suggest the fresh incarnation of his cruel spirit in Domitian. Now one way of reading this number 666 gives us the words *Neron Cæsar*. Moreover, if the final *n* of the Greek spelling is dropped and the Latin form of the word *Nero* is adopted we get the number 616 instead of 666, and that happens to be a variant reading of the text which is found in several ancient manuscripts and as such is recorded in the margin of our Revised Version. This solution of the riddle is therefore strengthened by the fact that it is equally satisfactory for either reading of the text.

Two other suggestions may be adopted alongside of the one just given. It would be in accordance with the symbolism of numbers, of which there are many examples in this book, if the thrice repeated six were intended to suggest a persistent falling short of the perfect number seven. This was a very early interpretation, for Irenæus, writing less than a century after John, says that the six hundreds, six tens and six units is “a summing up of the whole of that apostasy which has taken place during six thousand years.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in at least two places in the literature of early Christian times,<sup>2</sup> we find the number 888 used to represent Christ, because it summed up the value of the Greek letters in the name *Jesus* and suggested that He surpassed perfection. It is also possible that some old tradition of a sea monster had helped to shape the vision of the

<sup>1</sup> Irenæus, *Against Heresies*, Book 5, chap. xxviii. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Swete quotes *Sibylline Oracles*, i. 328ff (a Christian section of the book), in his *Commentary*, p. 176. Peake mentions an earlier reference by Marcus the Valentinian (*Commentary on the Bible*, 937).

## THE TWO BEASTS

prophet and that to this monster the number 666 had been attached. In support of this theory, it has been pointed out that a Hebrew phrase meaning "primeval chaos" yields the numerical value of 666. Either or both of these theories might explain the emergence of this number into the vision of the prophet and yet allow him to read a fresh meaning into it as he recognized the value of the letters of Nero's name. That would account for the form of his comment : "He that hath understanding let him count the number of the Beast, for it is (at the same time) the number of a man."

Passing from the details of the vision, concerning which there must always be room for much variety of interpretation, let us dwell for a moment on the clear and unmistakable impression it leaves upon us as a whole. Through the blasphemous claim that worship should be offered to its Emperors, Rome has become the vicegerent of Satan, opposing the Church on earth as Satan opposed Christ in heaven. Upon every Christian is pressed the supreme challenge as to whether he will really be the servant of Christ or the devil. The challenge meets him everywhere, for the implications of Emperor-worship are brought home to him even in the common arrangements of social and business life. John sees the deadly peril, and again and again he sets it forth for the warning of his fellow-Christians. There is no room for hesitation or compromise. They must not waver for an instant in their allegiance to Christ. Though persecution and martyrdom overtake them, they must endure to the end.

The Empire of Rome has passed away; its

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

politico-religious device of Emperor-worship is simply a matter of curious historical interest. But the spirit which found expression in the blasphemous claims of the Emperors has found other forms of expression since and has not yet exhausted its activity. Wherever a state or a church usurps the authority and worship which belongs only to God there we must recognize another manifestation of that monstrous power of evil which John in his vision saw as the Beast, and knew to be identified in his day with the persecuting Empire. So, as an *application* of the truth of this chapter, though not as the immediate *interpretation* of it, we may agree with those who find in it a reference to the Papacy of the Middle Ages. When the Pope asserted his claim to govern men's consciences as if he were God Himself, when he encouraged the use of images and set up forms of worship which at least fostered the tendency to idolatry, when he used the civil power of the sword to enforce acceptance of his authority and tried by all means, political and religious, to rule individuals and nations, body, mind and soul, it is perfectly legitimate to recognize in the Papacy a manifestation of the same evil spirit.

But we must not look to the past alone ; there are other ways in which this spirit appears and makes more subtle and insidious appeals to our own age. The forces of materialism and worldliness are arrayed against the Kingdom of Christ. Social traditions and customs tyrannize men and claim to overrule the voice of conscience and the law of God. Idols are set up to be worshipped and those who refuse are made to suffer. We can find such tendencies in

## THE TWO BEASTS

politics, in literature, in art, in commerce and even in church life. And, more directly analogous to the situation with which John was confronted, we find in some quarters to-day a persistent attempt to attribute to the State an unlimited authority over its members which means practically a claim to its deification and leaves no room for the exercise of individual conscience. So we still need warning against the worship of the Beast and encouragement to stand firm in the attitude of resistance and thus to manifest the faith and patience of the saints.

## CHAPTER 12

### ANTICIPATIONS OF THE END

“ Thrice blest is he to whom is given  
The instinct that can tell  
That God is on the field when He  
Is most invisible.

For right is right, since God is God,  
And right the day must win ;  
To doubt would be disloyalty,  
To falter would be sin.”

F. W. FABER.

THE long interlude which occurs between the sounding of the seventh trumpet and the outpouring of the seven bowls is concluded in the fourteenth chapter by a series of brief visions giving encouraging glimpses of the final issues of the great conflict, which are more fully revealed in the visions described in the later chapters of the book.

First we have the vision of the Lamb and His followers on Mount Zion and this affords an interesting sidelight on the psychological processes which lay behind the mystic experiences of the prophet. In dealing with the first of the three interludes in the progress of the drama which is the central portion of this book, we saw how John used a fragment of some Jewish apocalypse, which had moulded his mystical experiences, and quoted it with such

## ANTICIPATIONS OF THE END

slight modifications that it still retained its essentially Jewish character. Here, in this fourteenth chapter, we have another vision into which apparently the same conceptions enter, but now they are more completely transformed by the prophet's Christian experience and his consciousness of the immediate situation to be faced. The old figure of a hundred and forty-four thousand remains as evidence of this Jewish connexion, but all reference to the individual tribes disappears and the Jewish origin of the conception is entirely forgotten. The sealing has already taken place and we are now told that the mark of the seal is the name of the Lamb and His Father. The great song of praise is heard too by the prophet, as in the former case, but now it would seem that the song is sung by angelic choirs, not by the company of the sealed,<sup>1</sup> although they only among men can learn its meaning. The place where the Lamb and His followers are seen is also changed. They stand now not before the throne in heaven but on Mount Zion, the centre of the Messianic kingdom and the seat of the millennial reign on earth.

Other elements which have contributed to the form of this vision, besides those that went to the making of the vision in the seventh chapter, may probably be recognized with some degree of confidence. There is evidently some suggestion, by contrast, from the preceding visions of the Dragon and the Beasts. The mark or name of the Beast, given in a number, is placed upon the right hand or

<sup>1</sup> Dr Charles shows that xiv. 3 should be translated "and singing," not "and they sing," which makes it clear that the reference is to the heavenly harpers.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

upon the forehead of his followers, so the name of the Lamb and of His Father is sealed upon the forehead of His followers. The impious song “Who is like the Beast? Who can war with him?” is chanted by his followers, but an infinitely higher and holier strain of praise, accompanied by marvellous music of harps and sounding like the thunder or the waves breaking on the shore, rises in honour of the Lamb; and even if His followers are not singing it, they alone from their experience of redemption are able to interpret it.<sup>1</sup> Then another element enters into this vision, which will be more fully developed in the vision of the twentieth chapter.<sup>2</sup> In contrast with the Beast, who is given authority for forty-two months over every tribe and people and tongue and nation, is seen the Lamb, by whom he will be overcome and who will reign for a thousand years, and those who have been the victims of the Beast share His triumph and authority.

One other feature in the description of the hundred and forty-four thousand occasions much perplexity. It is said that they are celibates; the word translated “virgins” is masculine and men are exclusively indicated by the preceding clause. Of

<sup>1</sup> “The song has regard to matters of trial and triumph, of deep joy and heavenly purity of heart, which none other among men but these pure and holy ones are capable of apprehending. The sweetest and most skilful harmonies convey no pleasure to, nor are they appreciated by, an uneducated ear: whereas the experienced musician finds in every chord the most exquisite enjoyment. The unskilled ear, even though naturally distinctive of musical sounds, could not learn nor reproduce them: but both these can be done by those who have ears to hear them. Even so, this heavenly song speaks only to the virgin heart, and can be learnt only by those who accompany the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.”—Alford, *Greek Testament*, vol. iv.

P. 684.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 136.

## ANTICIPATIONS OF THE END

course it cannot be conceived that John did not include women in his thought of those who would be faithful unto death in the persecution he anticipated and there is no suggestion elsewhere that even in the symbolism of his visions only men appeared as martyrs. In addition to this John nowhere else in the book betrays such an ascetic view on the question of marriage as this statement seems to imply. On the contrary, the highest possible ideal of the marriage state is suggested by the imagery used in the twenty-first chapter. On several occasions, however, he uses the metaphor, so common in the prophets, which describes idolatry as adultery or fornication, and it may be that he was using this symbolism here. In that case, just as the purity of the martyrs in the vision of the seventh chapter is indicated by the white robes they wear in heaven, here it is directly affirmed under this familiar metaphor. Still it is difficult to take the first clause of the fourth verse in this metaphorical sense, even if the word translated "virgins" be so used, and the suggestion that these words may be due to a marginal explanation of a copyist, who held ascetic views, which afterwards crept into the text, has much in its favour.

The perfect purity of these followers of the Lamb is further emphasized by the statement that no lie was found in their mouth and they were without blemish. As such they were fit to be offered in sacrifice<sup>1</sup> to God and for this purpose they had been purchased from amongst men. We are reminded of

<sup>1</sup> That the word translated "first-fruits" often bore the meaning "offering" or "sacrifice" can be shown by many examples from the Greek version of the Old Testament and later Greek writings and inscriptions (Charles, *Commentary*, vol. ii. p. 6).

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

the vision of the souls of the martyrs underneath the altar which John had seen at the breaking of the fifth seal.<sup>1</sup> They had been offered in sacrifice but then the sacrifice was not complete ; they had to wait for their fellow-servants who would be killed in the persecution John recognized to be at hand. Now his vision takes in the future ; the number of the martyrs has been completed ; they are vindicated and avenged and this is shown by their following the Lamb in all the activities of His millennial reign, just as they had followed Him before even unto death.

If we seek to penetrate behind the symbolism of this vision and discover in the essential truth there a message for to-day, we must recognize that it is a repetition of the great appeal of the entire book. We are summoned to endurance in the agelong conflict which passes through such varied phases. Whatever be the form our struggle against the monstrous power of evil takes, we are not free from the temptation to lose heart and give up. Here we are bidden to find encouragement in the contemplation of the ultimate triumph of Christ and in the assurance that those who share His toil and sacrifice will also be partakers in His glorious victory. We do not see the issue here and now ; successive generations of the faithful have their place to take and their part to play, and we wait for the consummation of all faith and patience, all endurance and sacrifice. The centuries that have passed since John saw a vision of the end which he expected to arrive speedily have widened our horizon. But every generation of the faithful can comfort itself with the truth expressed

<sup>1</sup> Rev. vi. 9.

## ANTICIPATIONS OF THE END

in the closing words of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews : “ These all, having had witness borne to them through their faith, received not the promise, God having provided some better thing concerning us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

The next vision is of three angels flying in mid-heaven, who announce in turn details of the coming judgment which later visions will more fully describe. The first has “ an eternal gospel ” to proclaim to all the dwellers upon earth. It is not *the* gospel, for its contents are limited to the announcement of the arrival of the hour of judgment and a call to repentance in view of that fact. Yet it can be compared with the earliest proclamation of the gospel by our Lord<sup>1</sup> and with the preaching of St Paul at Lystra, in which he appealed to men to turn to “ the living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that in them is.”<sup>2</sup> Such a gospel is a direct challenge to all that was implied by Emperor-worship. The second angel announces the fall of “ Babylon the Great,” and here the language is coloured by reminiscences of the prophetic utterances against the actual city of Babylon,<sup>3</sup> which was the oppressor of the Jews in the darkest days of their earlier history, but now the name “ Babylon ” is obviously applied to Rome, as it is throughout the rest of this book. The import of this brief announcement will be fully revealed in the vision of the eighteenth chapter. The third angel gives an awful description of the punishment which will fall upon

<sup>1</sup> Mark i. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Acts xiv. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Isa. xxi. 9; Jer. li. 7 and 8.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

every worshipper of the Beast. The lurid imagery which is employed owes its character to Old Testament conceptions. The origin of much of it can be traced back to the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and something is due to the familiarity of the Jews with the fires which consumed their refuse in the Valley of Hinnom or Tophet. How far the prophet distinguished between the material symbolism and the spiritual reality it represented we cannot say. For us the most significant suggestion will be of the conscience at last awakened to the terrible nature of sin and consumed with undying remorse.

In face of this awful picture of doom men are encouraged to stand firm in their endurance of persecution. They must keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus and so manifest the patience of the saints. This lesson is further enforced by a voice John heard from heaven assuring him of the blessedness of those who henceforth should die in the Lord. We apply the words quite generally and say :

“ For he who dies believing  
Dies safely through Thy love.”

The application is fully justified, but when we are reading this book it must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the primary reference of the words was to the martyrs who should succumb in the persecution of the Church by the Empire. The special significance of this promise is that which we have already seen to be implied in the vision of the Lamb and His followers on Mount Zion. The prophet regards the impending persecution as marking the

## ANTICIPATIONS OF THE END

end of the age. By it the number of the martyrs will be completed and therefore those who die then will not have to wait for the consummation, like the souls beneath the altar in the vision described in the sixth chapter, but will immediately enter into their blessedness. Of course such conceptions as these belong to that view of the future life which regards it as still conditioned by time, and no other view was possible to New Testament writers. The idea of time as a condition of earthly life only and of another state of existence for which time has no meaning, belongs to a purely modern philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

The third vision described in this chapter is a picture of the Last Judgment, of which this book contains so many anticipations. It does not close the series of visions but that is no hindrance to our interpretation of it when we have realized that chronological sequence is not to be looked for in this book and that John has the true preacher's instinct for reiteration as a sure means of impressing the mind and conscience of his hearers or readers. In this case the Judgment is shown as the harvest and vintage of the earth. That the prophet's vision took this form was doubtless owing to some subconscious memory of the imagery of Joel :

" Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe ;  
Come, tread ye, for the winepress is full,  
The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great." <sup>2</sup>

Here the double figure of judgment, the reaping of the corn and the treading of the grapes, is simply an

<sup>1</sup> St Augustine anticipated this idea in his profound reflections on the absence of all conditions of time from the life of God (*Confessions*, Book xi.).

<sup>2</sup> Joel iii. 13.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

example of the parallelism which is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Hebrew poetry. In John's vision the double figure has been developed into two separate actions and some expositors see in the first a reference to the gathering of the saints and in the second to the destruction of the wicked. Probably such a distinction is not intended ; both parts of the vision represent the judgment of the wicked, as both figures of speech do in the prophecy of Joel. The terrible picture of the river of blood makes it evident that it is the punitive or destructive aspect of judgment which is emphasized. We are reminded of the description of Jehovah's return from His triumph over Edom,<sup>1</sup> but John's vision probably owed something to the Book of Enoch's description of sinners' destruction of each other in the last days :

" From dawn till sunset they shall slay one another  
And the horse shall walk up to the breast in the blood of  
sinners,  
And the chariot shall be submerged to its height."<sup>2</sup>

The consideration of the agents of judgment in this twofold vision brings us some perplexity. In the second part it is an angel who comes out of the temple in heaven, bearing a sharp sickle, and who gathers the vintage after receiving the divine command from another angel. In the first part the bearer of the sickle is described as one "like unto a son of man" wearing a golden crown and sitting on a cloud. But he also casts his sickle upon the earth and reaps it at the command which is announced in

<sup>1</sup> Isa. lxiii. 1-6; cf. Rev. xix. 13 and 15.

<sup>2</sup> Enoch c. 2 and 3.

## ANTICIPATIONS OF THE END

the great voice of “another angel” from the temple. Who is this one “like unto a son of man”? Remembering the use of the same phrase in the first chapter we naturally assume him to be Christ. But if so, it is strange that he should receive the divine command through an angel and still stranger that another angel should share with him the work of judgment. We cannot find relief from the difficulty by saying that Christ comes first to gather in the saints and an angel follows to destroy the wicked. In a later vision of the book it is Christ who treads the winepress of the wrath of God.<sup>1</sup> It seems simpler and better to take the “one like unto a son of man,” in this case, to be an angel. There is very little in this figure of the splendour we find elsewhere in John’s descriptions of his visions of Christ, and the fact that in this vision the agents of judgment are angels, while in later visions it is shown that judgment is in the hands of Christ, is quite in accord with the methods of this book.<sup>2</sup>

The long pause in the drama of the Seals, Trumpets and Bowls is now at an end. John and his readers have been fully prepared for the revelation that has yet to be given. Indeed that revelation has been anticipated by pregnant hints and brief glimpses. The darkness and terror which is to come will not overwhelm them. They shall not be afraid of evil tidings for by these visions their hearts have been fixed, trusting in the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> Rev. xix. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Dr Charles solves this problem, as he does many others, by the theory of interpolation. Thus he removes verses 15-17 and the words “the angel” in verse 19; the reference to Christ in verse 14 is then easily maintained.

## CHAPTER 13

### THE OUTPOURING OF THE BOWLS

“ God’s own profound  
Was above me, and round me the mountains,  
And under, the sea,  
And within me my heart to bear witness  
What was and shall be.”

R. BROWNING.

AFTER announcing the subject of his fresh vision, in the opening verse of the fifteenth chapter, John delays the description of it while he gives an account of another scene which appeared before his inward eye and records another of those glorious outbursts of heavenly music which are so frequently associated with his visions.

Perhaps this particular vision came to him as he gazed across the waters of the Ægean one evening and saw the reflection of the setting sun in their calm surface. In his mystic state he seemed to be standing by a sea of glass mingled with fire, on the shores of which a company of joyful singers had gathered. There was some connexion in his subconscious mind between them and the hosts of Israel singing their song of triumph by the Red Sea after their escape from Pharaoh. They also had passed through a sea of trouble ; they had escaped from the clutches of a

## THE OUTPOURING OF THE BOWLS

more terrible despotism than Pharaoh's, for they had been victorious over the Beast and all his instruments and agencies. So the song they sang had the note of triumph which characterized the song of Moses,<sup>1</sup> but it also had the higher and still more jubilant note of those who had conquered through the blood of the Lamb.<sup>2</sup> That reference had been vividly impressed on John's mind, but perhaps the words in which it had been made had escaped him, for the fragment he quotes is almost entirely made up of Old Testament phrases and does not specifically praise the Lamb. It glorifies God for His marvellous works and righteous ways which have been manifested to all men. John felt that this vision made a fitting prelude to the vision he was now constrained to describe. The music of that song would nerve the hearts of the faithful as they were called to contemplate the appalling details of the third series of seven judgments.

With this vision of the Bowls we are carried back to the scene which came into view at the sounding of the seventh trumpet.<sup>3</sup> From the open temple of heaven seven angels came forth arrayed in linen,<sup>4</sup> white and dazzling, and girdled with golden belts. To them are given, by one of the four living creatures, seven golden bowls—vessels broad and shallow in shape so that all their contents can be poured out suddenly. Similar vessels were ordinarily used for

<sup>1</sup> Exod. xv.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. v. 12-14.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. xi. 19.

<sup>4</sup> The rendering "stone" adopted in the Revised Version is impossible and the Revisers have been obliged to insert the adjective "precious" to make any sense of it. It is true that the oldest MSS. support this rendering but it is due either to a copyist's misreading of a single letter in the Greek word, or to a mistranslation into Greek of a Hebrew word.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

offering incense<sup>1</sup> in the Temple, or for pouring out libations of wine. But these bowls contain no offering for God ; they are filled with the wine of His wrath—the plagues with which the earth is swiftly to be drenched. Then the prophet sees the temple fill with smoke, as Isaiah had done when the vision of the divine holiness came to him.<sup>2</sup> It is not the smoke of acceptable incense with which devout worshippers are familiar. It is “from the glory of God and from His power.” It is the visible symbol of the holiness of God in conflict with the sin of man, the sign of the existence of a smouldering fire of righteous indignation which is about to blaze up in deeds of judgment upon mankind. Until the judgment is executed no one can enter the temple in which the divine glory and power are thus manifested ; God is a consuming fire.

The command is given, in a great voice coming from the temple, to pour out the bowls, and the seven angels in turn perform their dreadful task of destruction. Grievous sores break out upon men ; the waters of the world are turned into blood ; men are scorched by terrific heat ; great darkness falls upon the earth and anguish causes the sufferers to gnaw their tongues and blaspheme God ; the river Euphrates is dried up and the way prepared for an armed invasion from the East ; the kings of the world assemble for war ; and finally there are lightnings and voices and thunders, and a great earthquake which splits Rome into three parts, destroys cities of other nations, removes islands and mountains from their places, and is followed by a terrible

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rev. v. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Isa. vi.

## THE OUTPOURING OF THE BOWLS

storm of hail in which every stone is of phenomenal weight.

A close similarity will at once be recognized between these plagues and the woes announced by the sounding of the seven trumpets. There are, however, some differences which are significant because they arise from the distinctive aspect of judgment which the vision of the bowls expresses. This distinctive aspect of judgment is that which it bears towards the Roman Empire as the punishment of her Cæsar-worship and persecution of the Christians. The Empire is referred to throughout this series of judgments. The first plague falls upon "the men which had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image"; the fifth mentions the throne and the kingdom of the Beast; the sixth brings in again the Dragon, the Beast and the False Prophet (the second Beast) and three unclean spirits which proceed from their mouths; the seventh refers to Rome as "the great city" and "Babylon the great." In the second and third plagues the significant comment of "the angel of the waters" shows that this punishment is regarded as peculiarly appropriate to the crime of Rome. She had poured out the blood of the martyrs like water and now she can find nothing but blood to drink.

The difference between the woe announced by the sixth trumpet and the plague which followed the pouring of the sixth bowl calls for a little fuller comment. In the former case, monstrous horses and horsemen appeared, and we saw that, while they may have been suggested by the prevalent fear of the Parthian cavalry, they were not human warriors at

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

all but infernal demons. In this case, however, the Parthians themselves are clearly in view. The river Euphrates, the great natural barrier between East and West, is dried up, giving a clear road for the kings from the East. Rome is not behind in calling to her aid all her allies. In his vision, John sees three unclean spirits in the form of frogs coming from the mouths of the Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet. These lying spirits stir up the kings of the world and the lust for war takes possession of men. The war for which they gather together John believes to be the decisive conflict of God the Almighty with the Empire and its characteristic institution of Caesar-worship. The scene of the conflict is identified with the great historic battle-field of Israel which was the plain of Megiddo. There Barak and Deborah had overcome Sisera<sup>1</sup> and there King Josiah had fallen in battle with the Egyptians.<sup>2</sup> John, however, speaks not of the plain, but of the Mountain of Megiddo, for that is the meaning of Har-Magedon. There were hills in the vicinity of Megiddo which may have been known by the same name, and probably in his visionary state he was influenced by the prophetic tradition which regarded "the mountains of Israel" as the scene of the final conflict so often anticipated.<sup>3</sup>

During this description of the world-war to come there is a very impressive interruption in which Christians are warned of the imminence of the great day and exhorted to watchfulness. It is quite in

<sup>1</sup> Judges iv. 15; v. 19.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Kings xxiii. 29ff; 2 Chron. xxxv. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ezek. xxxix. 2, 4.

## THE OUTPOURING OF THE BOWLS

the style of some of the warnings found in the messages to the seven churches. Indeed it is so like those given to the church at Sardis that Dr Charles, following an earlier German commentator, believes it to have been torn from its context, and restores it to what he thinks its rightful place in the middle of the third verse of the third chapter. But to remove it to that position involves some repetition of the thought there. It may have been inserted at this point by some early copyist, but in any case it is quite fitting that a solemn reminder should be given here of the perils of carelessness and sloth. The imagery suggests one who may be surprised by sudden attack and therefore must not put off his garments to sleep lest he have to flee undressed. Such a warning is obviously pertinent wherever there is any danger of battle either in the material or the spiritual sense.

Apart from this warning, there is nothing in the account of the vision of the outpouring of the bowls to suggest that Christians have any share in these calamities. It may be that they are regarded as already removed from the earth by martyrdom and singing their song of triumph by the glassy sea. But we must not press any argument from what we suppose to be the requirements of a logical consistency in this book. It is enough to recognize that the special aspect in which this series of plagues is regarded is not that of discipline or trial for Christians, but that of punishment for their oppressors and persecutors.

It is vain to look for any exact fulfilment of the anticipations of this vision in history. Here, as

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

elsewhere, we must remember that what John is writing is prophecy, and prophecy is not history written beforehand. The prophet's distinguishing characteristic is not foresight but insight. He looks behind the appearance of things to the spiritual realities and he announces the things that he sees in the most vivid and arresting ways known to him. This does involve prediction as to the future yet the vindication of the truth of his message does not lie in the exact correspondence of event with prediction but in the true apprehension of eternal principles which apply to all the changing circumstances and conditions which have to be faced. The eternal truth expressed by the vivid imagery of these visions is that of the inevitable judgment of God upon sin. Some of the appalling descriptions of the manifestations of the wrath of God which John gives, and the spirit of exultation with which he seems to regard the fate of the enemies of the Church, savour more of the spirit of the Old Testament than of the New. The mind that is imbued with the idea of the love of Christ is repelled by them. But we must remember that John was living in a world which had not yet realized all the implications of that love and he knew no other way to express a conviction of the inflexible demands of righteousness than by picturing the extreme severity of punishment which must fall upon those who rejected those demands. It must at least be allowed to him that his descriptions of the punishment of the wicked do not go to such extremes as may be frequently found in that apocalyptic literature which had so largely influenced his thought. And it must be remembered that men who have stood

## THE OUTPOURING OF THE BOWLS

firm in obedience to the demands of religion and conscience in times of terrible persecution have always found their own faith and courage to be inseparable from the sternest views of the evil of their oppressors and the doom which that evil incurs.

## CHAPTER 14

### THE JUDGMENT OF THE SCARLET WOMAN

" An exile on Patmos, he sees a despised Church, poor within and menaced from without; and he sees this spectacle of triumph. He is a dreamer. No, he is practical; his book is a challenge to the Christian Church, a call to faith, to courage, to endurance—to martyrdom. . . . Set your teeth, he cries, the worst is coming, and the best; you will be put to death, but you will live and reign with Christ for ever and ever; and with you all the people you had to save and did not save, all you longed for and despaired of, will be Christ's; Alleluia, Babylon *is fallen.*"—Dr T. R. GLOVER.

THE fall of "Babylon" has already been twice announced<sup>1</sup> to the prophet in his visions and we have anticipated the interpretation of the name, of such sinister import in Jewish history, as a symbol for Rome, the capital of the Empire with which Christ and His Church were at war. This interpretation, however, has not been clearly and definitely made in the visions up to the point we have reached. Now follows a vision wholly concerned with the prediction of this event which for those persecuted Christians must have been the central and supremely significant incident in the great drama of judgment. And in the vision there is included such a full and detailed angelic interpretation as makes the reference to the city of Rome perfectly explicit.

<sup>1</sup> Rev. xiv. 8 and xvi. 19.

## JUDGMENT OF THE SCARLET WOMAN

One of the angels who had the seven bowls promises to show the prophet the judgment of “the great harlot that sitteth upon many waters.” The latter phrase is clearly a reminiscence of the description of Babylon in Jeremiah,<sup>1</sup> but the shameful epithet “harlot” owes its origin to Old Testament descriptions, not of Babylon but of Tyre<sup>2</sup> and Nineveh.<sup>3</sup> In the case of those cities it referred to the intercourse they had with foreign nations which was productive of both moral and religious evil and as applied to Rome under the name of “Babylon” it has the same significance. Rome is the mistress of the nations in a double sense. By her lust for conquest she has drawn them into intercourse with herself and corrupted them with her vices, making them “drunken with the wine of her fornication.”<sup>4</sup>

Then, in his ecstasy, John is carried to a wilderness where he is shown the woman. Her appearance suggests the ostentatious magnificence of the city, for she is arrayed in purple and scarlet, decked with precious jewels and holds in her hand a golden cup full of the abominations with which she has intoxicated the nations. She herself is drunken with the blood of saints and martyrs—those whom she could not seduce to the spiritual adultery of Emperor-worship. Like the prostitutes of the city she represents, she wears upon her forehead a band bearing her name. That name is a “mystery,” that is to say it is one which has a symbolical meaning. And the name is “*Babylon the Great, the Mother of the Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth.*”

<sup>1</sup> Jer. li. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Isa. xxiii. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Nahum iii. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. xvii. 2; cf. Jer. li. 7.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

Here, then, we have the city of Rome under a two-fold symbol—the Great Harlot and Babylon the Great. When John heard of her as Babylon she was seated on many waters. Now that he sees her in the shape of a woman she is seated upon a scarlet coloured beast. That change was, of course, necessary to the development of the vision. A city may be seated on many waters but not when it is seen symbolized as a woman! In that case the waters must also be symbolized. And perhaps there was some link in the prophet's subconscious mind between the Beast he had seen in a previous vision and an ancient mythological dragon of the waters which made the transition easy from the thought of Babylon seated on many waters to the conception of her as seated on the Beast he had seen coming from the sea. But the picture of ancient Babylon is already fading from his mind, like a dissolving view, and its place is being taken by the new city, which is Rome, seated not on many waters but on seven hills. So the seven heads of the Beast are interpreted primarily as representing these hills and the many waters on which ancient Babylon was built have no more place in the prophet's vision. Failing to recognize this, some early copyist seems to have added a marginal note explaining the many waters as "peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues," and this note soon became incorporated with the text, thus introducing an unnecessary complication to the interpretation.

As the angel's explanation of the meaning of the vision proceeds, the significance of the identity of this Beast with that of the former vision becomes

## JUDGMENT OF THE SCARLET WOMAN

clear. The Beast symbolizes the Empire, and its seven heads having served to suggest the seven hills on which the city is built, geographical facts fall out of view and political facts come into the foreground. The seven heads now represent seven kings or emperors and, as the angel of the vision puts it : Here is the opportunity of the discerning mind ! It may have been easier for the discerning mind in John's day to read the riddle than it is to-day, but we, at any rate, can hardly be certain as to its precise solution.

It must be remembered that the heads and horns of the Beast belong to the original conception of the uncouth monster which suggested the form of John's vision. Their number was not determined by the historical facts which were to be symbolized ; those facts had to be selected to accord with the number. Having granted that the heads represent emperors, the particular seven to be chosen depends upon the point at which the series begins and upon whether all successive emperors are reckoned in it or not. Full discussion of this question would not be in place here, but the most likely suggestion seems to be that the series begins with Augustus, Julius Cæsar not being regarded as "Emperor" in the full sense of the word. Then, if three names are omitted of emperors who reigned for such very brief periods that it is not likely that they gained recognition in the East, the following six would be Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian and Titus.

The great difficulty of interpretation arises in connexion with the tenth verse of the chapter. Speaking of these seven kings, the angel says : "Five are fallen ; the one is, the other is not yet come ; and

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

when he cometh he must continue a little while." According to the list given above this dates the vision from the reign of Vespasian. But, as the present exposition shows throughout, the general trend of evidence points to the Book of the Revelation as having been written in the time of Domitian, who succeeded Titus, and should accordingly be the eighth emperor referred to in the following verse. Two suggestions may be made in relief of this difficulty. One is that we have here an instance of a convention, common in apocalyptic literature, by which an earlier standpoint is assumed in order to veil the statement of contemporaneous events and conditions under the guise of prediction. Thus the actual fact of the brevity of the reign of Titus would appear to have been foretold. The alternative is that an earlier vision, either of John himself or of some one else, was one of the elements that entered into this vision or confused the remembrance and description of it. Apart from some such explanation, the whole vision must be regarded as a rather clumsy piece of literary patchwork—a theory which raises far more difficulties than it solves and is entirely inconsistent with the fundamental principles upon which the present exposition of the Book of the Revelation is based.

But the difficulty we have been considering need not leave us in any doubt as to the meaning of this vision. In a previous chapter we have seen how closely John identified the Beast with Nero, regarding him as the embodiment of the persecuting power of the Empire, seeing in the widespread belief in his return a suggestion of a fresh incarnation of

## JUDGMENT OF THE SCARLET WOMAN

his cruel spirit in Domitian, and reading into the mysterious number of the Beast the letters of his name. Now in this vision the same identification of the Beast with Nero is found in the eighth verse of the chapter where he is described as one who "was and is not and is about to come up out of the abyss and to go into perdition." Then, in the eleventh verse, after the seven heads have been interpreted as seven emperors, the Beast himself is said to be an eighth and yet "one of the seven." What can this cryptic utterance mean except that the eighth emperor, Domitian, is regarded as Nero come to life again ? Then the ten horns fall into their place in the symbolism as representing the Parthian rulers, "the kings from the sunrising" of the previous vision, whom Nero was expected to bring with him on his return. With their aid he would accomplish his cruel will, not only against the Christians but also against Rome, causing her to suffer even more terribly than she had done in the great fire of the year 64, which it was believed Nero himself had instigated. Yet the Beast and his allies would not prevail against the Lamb and His followers. Their policy and purpose would be controlled by the will of God and their fury against the city which was the capital of the Empire would be the execution of the judgment of the Lamb, who is the Lord of lords and King of kings.

Of course all this seems bewilderingly illogical if it is considered as the result of a literary effort to set forth certain ideas under the similitude of a vision. But when it is regarded as the description of a genuine visionary experience it is easy to recognize

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

in it those sudden and apparently inconsequent changes of forms and symbols which are characteristic even of normal dreams and in which our modern psycho-analysts find so much significance. It is difficult to believe that an early Christian writer, using the form of vision merely as a literary device, through his very lack of skill in dealing with his material, could have hit upon so correct a reproduction of the psychological conditions of visionary experience!

When John has heard the angel's explanation of the vision of the Woman and the Beast, another angel appears to him, coming down from heaven, one of great authority, the glory of whose presence irradiates the earth. With a mighty voice he again announces the fall of Babylon, and tells how her ruins have become the habitation of demons and unclean birds. The tale of woe is taken up by still another voice from heaven which first summons the people of God to come out of the city, so that they may escape her sins and her punishment, and then passes on to chant a great and solemn dirge over her. In language which is full of echoes of the doom songs of Old Testament prophets for Babylon, Tyre and Edom,<sup>1</sup> he vividly portrays the ruin which will overtake the city. She says in her heart: "I sit a queen and am no widow and shall in nowise see mourning." But suddenly her plagues will come upon her—death and mourning and famine and burning with fire. Then the greatness of the catastrophe which will overwhelm her is suggested by a description of the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Isa. xiii. and xiv., xxxiv., xlviij.; Jer. l. and li.; Ezek. xxvi.-xxviii.

## JUDGMENT OF THE SCARLET WOMAN

dismay of those who have ministered to her luxury and shared in her vice. They will stand afar off for fear of being swallowed up in her ruin and, while they gaze at the smoke of her burning, they will weep and lament for the woe that has overtaken the great and strong city. The merchants will mourn the loss of their trade ; the sailors and shipowners will mourn the loss of their freights ; but saints, apostles and prophets will rejoice because God's judgment is manifested.

At this point the doom song is interrupted by the action of another angel in the vision who takes up a great stone and casts it into the sea as a symbol of the complete destruction and final disappearance of the city. And then the dirge is resumed to describe the silent and deserted ruins. No sound of music is heard, no noise of the craftsmen at their work, no sound of the grinding of the mill ; no light of lamp is seen and no wedding procession passing along the street. All is silence and desolation such as one may find to-day as one treads the echoing streets of long-buried Pompeii. And the vision ends with the reiteration of the truth that this awful fate was due to the fact that the city had become the centre of persecution and was responsible for all the blood of the martyrs that had been shed upon the earth.

The city of Rome has never suffered such destruction as this vision describes,<sup>1</sup> but nevertheless the

<sup>1</sup> The imperial city did, of course, finally fall into ruin, and it is interesting to read in connexion with Rev. xviii. an extract from an Italian named Poggius, who wrote *On the Vicissitudes of Fortune*, in the year 1430, which is quoted by Gibbon in the last chapter of his *Decline and Fall* and describes the prospect of the ruins as he viewed them from the hill of the Capitol.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

essential truth of the prophecy of judgment upon the city as capital of the Empire has been fulfilled. Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* may be regarded as a commentary on this text. In the slow decay of moral and political power, followed by the inrush of barbarian races, the break-up of the huge Empire and the capture and sack of the city by Alaric the Goth, we may recognize history's vindication of the truth suggested by the vision of the inspired prophet.

But the fulfilment of this prophecy is not to be looked for only in those events. It is to be seen also in the issue of the conflict between the two religions which were contesting the world—the worship of the Emperor and the worship of Christ. Emperor-worship has long ago been cast into the limbo of rejected and outworn superstitions but the name of Christ means more and more to the world and His Kingdom still grows and spreads. And here we approach the permanent significance of the prophecy—the message it has for to-day and for all time. We learn the victorious might of divine righteousness when it comes into collision with evil and wickedness. Particularly do we see the power of that righteousness over those forms of evil which arm themselves with political weapons and material resources and tyrannize the lives and destinies of men. Babylon has not passed away with the Roman Empire. As Sir George Adam Smith has put it: "Babylon never dies. To the conscience of Christ's seer, this *mother of harlots*, though dead and desert in the East, came to life again in the West. . . . Rome was Babylon, in so far as Romans were filled with

## JUDGMENT OF THE SCARLET WOMAN

cruelty, with arrogance, with trust in riches, with credulity in divination, with that waste of mental and moral power which Juvenal exposed in her. . . . But we are not to leave the matter even here : we are to use that freedom with John which John uses with our prophet (Isaiah). We are to pass by the particular fulfilment of his words in which he and his day were interested, because it can only have a historical and secondary interest to us in face of other Babylons in our own day, with which our consciences if they are quick, ought to be busy.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr Smith goes on to refer to the way the reference of this prophecy is often confined to the Church of Rome but, allowing for the fact that many of the features of the Roman Empire may be traced in the Papacy and one *application* of the prophecy be made in that direction (as we have shown in our eleventh chapter) he points out that there are other incarnations of the Babylonian spirit which are a much greater peril to us than the Church of Rome can ever be.

So do not let us be misled by the idea that the only fresh incarnation we have to fear of the Scarlet Woman is in Romanism. Wherever we find the spirit of atheism, materialism and worldliness lifting its head, there we may recognize the Scarlet Woman ! Wherever we find a community that thinks more of its wealth than of the welfare of its people ; wherever we find one that refuses to set right manifest wrongs for fear of offending powerful interests, putting safety before justice, allowing its politics to be determined by its trade or its morality by its need

<sup>1</sup> *Isaiah*, Vol. II. pp. 199-200.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

of revenue ; wherever we find one dominated by militarism, burning with the lust of hate and revenge—there we may see Babylon rebuilt and symbolize her as the Scarlet Woman, the Mother of the Harlots and the Abominations of the Earth.

But while we think of communities—churches and nations, states and societies—we must remember our personal obligations also. Our hearts must be kept free from the infection of Babylon—her pride and arrogance, her hardness and cruelty, her love of gain and pleasure, her indifference to God and worship of self. There is still a personal application for us to make of the words John heard spoken from heaven : “ Come forth, my people, out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.”

## CHAPTER 15

### THE JUDGMENT OF THE BEASTS AND THE DRAGON AND THE LAST JUDGMENT

“ Oh how comely it is and how reviving  
To the Spirits of just men long opprest !  
When God into the hands of their deliverer  
Puts invincible might  
To quell the mighty of the Earth, th’ oppressor,  
The brute and boist’rous force of violent men  
Hardy and industrious to support  
Tyrannic power, but raging to pursue  
The righteous and all such as honour Truth ;  
He all their Ammunition  
And feats of War defeats  
With plain Heroic magnitude of mind  
And celestial vigour arm’d,  
Their Armouries and Magazines contemns,  
Renders them useless, while  
With winged expedition  
Swift as the lightning glance he executes  
His errand on the wicked, who surpris’d  
Lose their defence distracted and amaz’d.”

MILTON.

THE first ten verses of the nineteenth chapter form a link between the vision that has just been described and those yet to come. As on previous occasions, there is given to the prophet a glimpse of the attitude of heaven towards happenings on earth. Though the overthrow of the harlot-city has only been predicted as something to take place in the

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

near future, from the heavenly point of view it is already accomplished and great rejoicings take place over the true and righteous judgments of God. A chorus of hallelujahs rises from all the dwellers in heaven and the four-and-twenty elders and the four living creatures are seen again prostrating themselves before the throne. Then a voice sounds from the throne summoning all the servants of God, small and great, to praise Him. And like the voice of many waters and mighty thunders the great song rises : "Hallelujah for the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigneth."

As the song proceeds a new element is introduced and the great conception which will be developed in the closing chapters of the book is first suggested. The marriage of the Lamb is anticipated. Instead of the harlot the Bride is pictured. Instead of the purple and scarlet robes, suggesting the ostentatious pomp and pride of Rome, is the fine linen, bright and pure, which is interpreted as "the righteous acts of the saints." By a confusion which is natural enough to the symbolism of the vision, the saints who form the Church which is the Bride are also the guests at the marriage supper and the blessedness of their lot from that point of view is expressed. Then the prophet falls at the feet of the angel who speaks with him in the vision but he is rebuked for offering to a creature and a fellow-servant the worship that is due to God alone. Though he is an angel, his message is dependent upon the witness, or self-revelation, of Jesus just as that of the prophet is.

Though the subject of the marriage of the Lamb has been introduced it is not proceeded with at this

## THE JUDGMENT OF THE BEASTS

point. In the fashion so characteristic of these visions there is a return to an earlier cycle of ideas. Some repetition and confusion of thought arises in this way and many scholars have explained it on the hypothesis that we have here not the work of the prophet himself but a collection of fragments of earlier apocalypses which have been unskilfully pieced together by some editor. Dr Charles claims that all the material comes from John himself but thinks that he died before finishing his work and that the confusion is due to a disciple who did not understand the material John had left and altogether disarranged it when he completed and issued the book. The present writer has already sufficiently indicated his dissatisfaction with the view on which this theory is based but would like to restate his position in the words of another student of the subject :

“ It is not an evidence of an interfering and stupid editor, it is only what psychology leads us to expect, if we find that ‘visions’ more or less ‘interfere’ with one another ; that, in place of that steady development of theme which Charles desiderates, there should be a series of flashes playing alternately on this and that topic ; that a new and great thought should be obtruding itself before its predecessor had been fully grasped, and that then there should be a re-emergence of the former. What, from a purely literary or logical standpoint may appear something of a hotchpotch, may perfectly well be psychologically a true representation of the process of ‘visions’.”<sup>1</sup>

The thought to which the prophet harks back, after

<sup>1</sup> Rev. W. D. Niven, M.A., in *Expository Times*, Vol. XXXIII.  
p. 422.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

mentioning the marriage of the Lamb, is that of the judgment which has been described in general terms in the vision of the outpouring of the bowls and in more detail as it affects the city of Rome in the vision of the judgment of the Scarlet Woman. Now the visions go on to deal with the judgment of the Beast, the False Prophet (the second Beast) and the Dragon who is Satan.

The heaven opens again and the prophet sees a white horse with a rider who is described as "Faithful and True." He has a name written, probably on His forehead, which no one is able to read but Himself. It is the new name referred to in the promise of those who overcome, given in the message to Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> That name corresponds to the deepest realities of His nature which none on earth may understand, but for the aid of their faith another title is given Him, which is written on His garment and on His thigh : *King of kings and Lord of lords*. Christians know Him as "The Word of God," yet He is not revealed in this vision as the Word dwelling among men to give them light and life, as the prologue to the fourth gospel presents Him. He is here the Warrior-Judge. His flaming eyes pierce through all disguises and shrivel up all deceits ; the diadems He wears denote His universal sovereignty ; His blood-stained garments speak of the execution He has wrought upon his enemies.<sup>2</sup> Behind Him, on white horses, ride the armies of heaven, all clothed in white—a pageant of victory. The sharp two-edged sword proceeding from His mouth, which John had seen in his first vision,<sup>3</sup> is recognized

<sup>1</sup> Rev. iii. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Isa. lxiii. 1-6.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. i. 16; ii. 12.

## THE JUDGMENT OF THE BEASTS

again and passages from Scripture rush to the mind of the prophet telling how the Messiah should "smite the earth with the rod of his mouth,"<sup>1</sup> how He should rule the nations with a rod of iron,<sup>2</sup> and how He should tread the winepress of God's wrath alone.<sup>3</sup>

What is the meaning of this triumphant appearance of Christ? The answer to that question is given as the vision proceeds. The scene before the mystic eye of the prophet shifts again and an angel appears, "standing in the sun," who calls upon the carrion birds of the air to come and glut themselves on the corpses of the men and horses who have fallen in the great battle. It was an added horror of defeat and death, in the eyes of the ancient world, for a corpse to be left unburied, a prey to unclean birds. Sophocles' great drama *Antigone* turns on this. John and his readers would feel the full force of this horror, and perhaps also see a gruesome contrast between this "great supper of God" and the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Again the scene changes and the reason for what has already been shown is made manifest.<sup>4</sup> The battle has been with the Beast and the kings of the earth—the Empire and the Parthian allies whom the returning Nero was expected to bring to his aid. Now they are seen in battle array but only the issue of the conflict is described. The Beast and the False Prophet (the second Beast, who represents

<sup>1</sup> Isa. xi. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. ii. 9 (LXX.); cf. Rev. ii. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. lxiii. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Here, as elsewhere in this book, a good deal of perplexity is escaped when we remember that in telling dreams we often "think back"—one scene recalling another which in part explains it. Students of psycho-analysis realize this. And even literary artists sometimes employ a similar method—Joseph Conrad, for instance.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

the imperial priesthood) are cast alive into the lake of fire and their allies are slain and left to the birds.

Thus end, for the prophet in his visions, the two monstrous powers of evil by which he and his fellow-Christians are being persecuted and oppressed. But behind those powers he had recognized another of which they were but the agents and ministers. It was Satan, the great Dragon,<sup>1</sup> who was the real antagonist of Christ and His Church. And if final and complete victory were to be won, the Dragon must himself be overthrown. So John's expectations of final victory stimulate his spiritual imagination and the great fact of which he is assured again clothes itself in the symbolism of a vision.

Around the interpretation of this particular vision fierce and prolonged controversy has raged, but if we continue to follow the methods and principles of interpretation which have served us throughout our study of this book, we shall not find it necessary to concern ourselves about some of the questions which have been so hotly debated all through the history of the Church.

The first part of the vision reveals an angel descending from heaven with the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. He lays hold of the Dragon, binds him with the chain and thrusts him into the abyss which he then shuts and seals. It is stated that the period for which the devil is thus bound will be a thousand years and that after that he must be loosed for a little time. But whether this information came to the prophet by angelic mediation in his vision, or whether it is his after-

<sup>1</sup> See Rev. xii

## THE JUDGMENT OF THE BEASTS

comment on what he had seen, is not evident. Then the prophet sees thrones set in the heavenly court and the faithful martyrs are raised from the dead to sit upon them and to share the reign of Christ on earth which will last a thousand years. This is described as "the first resurrection" and it is explained that the rest of the dead will not rise until the thousand years has passed. A benediction is then pronounced upon these risen martyrs over whom the second death has no power and who are made priests of God and share Christ's reign.

As on previous occasions, the form of this vision and the language in which it is described have both been largely influenced by Jewish apocalyptic conceptions. We can find the clue to some of these ideas in the specimens of Jewish apocalyptic literature that have come down to us. In a section of the *Book of Enoch* written about 95 B.C. the history of the world is mapped out into periods called "weeks."<sup>1</sup> In a later book, *The Secrets of Enoch*, these periods are reduced to seven and are called "days," but by use of the idea suggested in the ninetieth Psalm—"a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday"—they are allowed to represent a thousand years each. Then, by analogy with the seven days of creation, the seventh period is regarded as a Sabbath-millennium of rest and blessedness.<sup>2</sup> It is not stated, however, that this seventh period is

<sup>1</sup> *Enoch xciii. 3-14*, followed by *xci. 12-17*.

<sup>2</sup> *Secrets of Enoch*, xxxiii. 1. That this idea was accepted by Christians can be shown from a passage in Irenæus which explicitly states that as the world was created in six days, it will be concluded in six days of a thousand years each.—*Against Heresies*, Book 5, chap. xxviii. 3; cf. also 2 Peter iii. 8.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

identical with that of the Messianic reign. Generally no limit for that reign is mentioned but in the *Fourth Book of Ezra*, which is probably to be dated between A.D. 30 and 70, it is stated that it will last four hundred years.<sup>1</sup> John was evidently influenced by the current Jewish idea of a Sabbath-millennium and he took that to be the period of Christ's reign on earth, during which Satan was to be bound.

It was also a conception of Jewish apocalyptic literature, which Christians had already adopted, that when the Messiah set up His reign on earth His saints should reign with Him. Our Lord Himself has used language moulded by this conception though He had transformed and spiritualized the idea in His teaching. Generally, however, these saints who reign with Christ appear to be the righteous who survive on the earth at His coming. But here John does not contemplate the existence of any faithful survivors. He thinks of all the faithful as having suffered martyrdom and he is concerned as to the special reward to be given to those who have maintained their loyalty at the cost of their lives. In the vision of the breaking of the Seals he has already seen the souls of the earlier martyrs given the white garment of the resurrection body<sup>2</sup> and now he sees all the rest of the martyrs sharing in a "first resurrection" in which no one else takes part. There is nothing else in the New Testament corresponding to this idea. We may recognize the truth of John's conviction that those who have laid

<sup>1</sup> 4 Ezra vii. 28. The figure is arrived at by combining Gen. xv. 13 with Ps. xc. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. vi. 11. See p. 57.

## THE JUDGMENT OF THE BEASTS

down their lives for Christ will not lose their reward, but we know that martyrdom is not the only test of loyalty and faith. The form of reward John here describes we must put down to his own peculiar outlook and not find a doctrine upon this passage which is unsupported elsewhere. To allegorize or spiritualize his words by saying that they refer to the resurrection of the soul from sin is to introduce a method of interpretation which can make this or any other Scripture mean anything the reader desires.

With regard to the thousand years of Christ's reign on earth, remembering the purely symbolical character of all numbers which occur in these visions, we must see in this simply the splendid prophecy of the final and complete victory of Christ. It is altogether to misunderstand it and the book in which it is found to regard it as a programme in advance of the manner and time of that victory. Christians have been led far astray by the endeavour to impose a literal interpretation on the sublime symbolism which the inspired imagination of the prophet John moulded out of the strange and often fantastic conceptions of Jewish apocalypse.

The prediction that has already been made that after the millennium Satan will be loosed for a little time is repeated in the seventh verse of the chapter, and a vague reference is made to great world conflicts yet to come, in which occur the names of Gog and Magog—the conventional symbols which later apocalyptic literature borrowed from Ezekiel<sup>1</sup> to represent nations hostile to the people of God. Then the prediction passes into a fragmentary

<sup>1</sup> Ezek. xxxviii. and xxxix.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

description of a vision of these wars, ending with the final destruction of the Dragon in the lake of fire into which the Beast and the False Prophet had already been cast.

After this, the description becomes clearer and fuller as it passes to the vision of the Last Judgment. Here we have one of the most solemn and impressive pictures this book contains. A throne is set of dazzling whiteness in the revealing light of which all men must stand. It is not the throne of universal sovereignty but the tribune of universal judgment. Such judgment belongs to One alone—it is not shared with the martyrs as in the earlier vision of the millennium—and He is reverently left unnamed. Earth and heaven vanish before His face ; there is room for nothing else, in the consciousness of men, when they stand in the presence of infinite holiness. And now the dead, great and small, thus stand before Him. Death and Hades, the shadowy world of departed spirits, give up those whom they have held in their power and the sea surrenders those whom it has devoured. All are judged according to their works. And for this purpose the books are opened which contain the record of men's actions<sup>1</sup> and another book called "the Book of Life" in which the names of the redeemed are registered. Death and Hades, now personified as demoniac powers, are cast into the lake of fire, which punishment is described as "the second death," and any whose names are not recorded in the Book of Life share the same fate.

It is an awe-inspiring picture which sets forth, in symbolical fashion, truths which are an essential

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dan. vii. 10.

## THE JUDGMENT OF THE BEASTS

part of Christian teaching. They were taught by our Lord and the Apostle Paul repeatedly dwelt upon them. Some would see in this picture two contradictory ideas, one which suggests that destiny will be determined by character, and the other that it will be determined by the choice of redeeming grace. These contrasted aspects of judgment are irremovable from any form of Christian doctrine found in the New Testament. There is no contradiction between them though we may not see exactly how they are to be reconciled. Nothing is clearer than that we are taught that "we must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done whether it be good or bad,"<sup>1</sup> and yet that it is "not by works done in righteousness which we did ourselves, but according to His mercy He saved us."<sup>2</sup> However irreconcilable the antinomy may be to the speculative reason, its practical solution is evident to all humble and earnest Christian minds. We must live as those who have to render an account of their works and yet as those who know that even if they had done all that was commanded, they would be unprofitable servants whose hope is in having their names written in the Book of Life of the Lamb that was slain.

" While I draw this fleeting breath,  
When my eyelids close in death,  
When I soar to worlds unknown,  
See Thee on Thy Judgment-throne,  
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee."

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. v. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Titus iii. 5.

## CHAPTER 16

### THE GREAT CONSUMMATION

“ My soul, there is a country  
Afar beyond the stars,  
Where stands a wingèd sentry  
All skilful in the wars.  
There, above noise and danger,  
Sweet Peace sits, crown’d with smiles,  
And One born in a manger  
Commands the beauteous files.  
He is thy gracious Friend,  
And—O my soul, awake !—  
Did in pure love descend  
To die here for thy sake.  
If thou canst get but thither,  
There grows the flower of Peace,  
The Rose that cannot wither,  
Thy fortress, and thy ease.  
Leave then thy foolish ranges ;  
For none can thee secure  
But One Who never changes—  
Thy God, thy life, thy cure.”

H. VAUGHAN.

THE long series of visions of judgment is over. The great conflict has been fought and won. The Dragon with his agents the Beasts and all who aided and abetted them are cast into the lake of fire. Death and Hades, the last enemies that harassed and destroyed men, are themselves destroyed. Like Dante, leaving Hell with his guide, we emerge from the terror and gloom to “ distinguish the beauteous things which heaven bears and thence we issue to see again the stars.”

## THE GREAT CONSUMMATION

John has not been able to forget this closing vision of the great consummation of the divine purpose even while he has still been describing his visions of judgment. The marriage of the Lamb was anticipated in the heavenly song of triumph over the fall of the harlot-city, and it looks as if the prophet was even then on the point of describing the city which was to be the Bride. Now he returns to that theme, telling how he saw a new heaven and a new earth, fulfilling the prophecy<sup>1</sup> of a section of the Book of Isaiah which had much influence on the vision he is beginning to describe. Very significantly he adds “and the sea is no more.” The sea had often been regarded as the restless and devouring enemy by Jewish writers both in the Old Testament and out of it. Probably the origin of that idea may be found in the myth of a chaos monster whom God overcame at the creation, which partly accounts for the form of the Dragon in this book, but what would be uppermost in the mind of one separated from his friends by exile on an island would be the feeling suggested in the pregnant line of Matthew Arnold: “The unplumb’d, salt, estranging sea.”<sup>2</sup> Then he speaks of the holy city which he saw “coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.” But before entering upon a detailed description of that city as he saw it, he prepares the minds of his readers to understand the significance of the vision by telling them what he heard.

A voice spoke to him from the throne announcing the fulfilment of the deepest yearnings of the saints and the holiest anticipations of the prophets of all

<sup>1</sup> Isa. lxv. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *To Marguerite* (last line).

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

the ages. God is to dwell with His people in free and gracious intercourse. By His presence all grief and sorrow and pain, even death itself, shall be for ever banished. He Himself proclaims, from the throne of His creative power and redemptive love, that He makes all things new. The wonder of it all is overwhelming, but the announcement is confirmed in the most solemn fashion by Him who is the first and the last. To all who thirst for life He will give to drink freely from its fountain, and all who overcome in their battle will share the glories of the new order of things and enjoy perfect fellowship with Him as His children. But as for the rest—those who are guilty of all manner of evil—they have cut themselves off from all such privilege and incurred the doom of the second death in the lake of fire.

Now the prophet would describe more fully what he saw in his vision, so he goes back to the beginning and tells how it was shown to him by “one of the angels who had the seven bowls,” just as the earlier vision of the judgment of the Scarlet Woman was. The words of the angel in each case appear to suggest an intentional contrast between the two visions: “Come hither, I will show thee the judgment of the great harlot.”<sup>1</sup> “Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”<sup>2</sup> Look on this picture and on that and let the contrast between them stimulate both fear and hope, both thankfulness and awe.

As we read the prophet’s description of this Bride-city, glowing with colour, full of splendid imagery, impressing us powerfully by the brilliance of the poetic imagination it displays, we need to

<sup>1</sup> Rev. xvii. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. xxi. 9.

## THE GREAT CONSUMMATION

enter into deep sympathy with the spiritual emotion with which he sets forth the inexpressible glory and joy of the heavenly life under the figures and symbols of earth. We cannot arrive at the meaning and worth of this vision by any mere analysis of its content, in which we trace the imagery to its sources, or by reading into separate details some allegorical significance, or by attempting so to harmonize the features described that we can reconstruct the city in our imagination or draw a plan or picture of it on paper. We must treat it as inspired poetry and allow it to kindle in our souls all the emotions of wonder and hope and joy of which it was born. We can find no better language in which to express our aspirations for the heavenly life, the things which eye hath not seen nor ear heard nor heart conceived.

It is well for us, however, to understand something of the great heritage of prophetic tradition by which John's imagination had been stimulated and enriched. As we go back to the words of the prophets and psalmists we realize how much Jerusalem had always stood for in the minds of devout Israelites. For them it was always the City of God. It might be cursed by foolish and wicked rulers ; it might be disgraced by the corruption and apostasy of its people ; it might be razed to the dust by heathen conquerors ; yet the divine love and purpose for it remained the same. Though not one stone of it were left upon another, God had graven it on the palms of His hands and its walls were continually before Him.<sup>1</sup> And when all the pious and patriotic hopes that had centred in the restoration

<sup>1</sup> Isa. xl ix. 16.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

of the city seemed doomed to disappointment, when it appeared to some of the most devout and faithful lovers of the city that it was too stained with evil and too secularized in spirit ever to become the centre of the Messianic Kingdom for which they looked, they conceived a fresh hope that its heavenly counterpart, pure and perfect, prepared in heaven from the beginning of things, would descend to earth and thus the God-given ideal would be realized.<sup>1</sup>

It is this great conception which we have, born anew and born in nobler form, in John's vision. We find much in it that reminds us of Hebrew prophecy, particularly of the closing chapters of Isaiah and of Ezekiel's description of his ideal city,<sup>2</sup> but all the old material is remoulded and filled with the spirit of Christian faith and hope. The details that are given are all profoundly suggestive so long as they are read as poetical figures of speech not as the items of an architect's specifications! There is an amplitude in the city's proportions which promises room for all—"many mansions." It lies foursquare, the length and breadth being equal and the measurement of each nearly fourteen hundred miles.<sup>3</sup> Its wall,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gal. iv. 26. The idea, however, was not clearly or widely held until after the fall of Jerusalem, A.D. 70.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek. xl. ff.

<sup>3</sup> That is what the first part of verse 16 suggests. In the second part the words "and the height" occur which make the city a cube in shape. This would follow the analogy of the Holy of holies and, according to symbolical usage, would suggest the idea of perfection. It is a little difficult, however, to see why this third dimension should be introduced here, especially as the height of the wall is mentioned as 216 feet. Certainly it may belong to John's original description but possibly it may have been added by a later copyist who had in mind the measurements of the altars of burnt offering and incense, and the Holy of holies (Exod. xxvii. 1; xxx. 2; 1 Kings vi. 20).

## THE GREAT CONSUMMATION

great and high, suggests the security of those who dwell within it and its twelve gates, each with its angel guardian, tell of the universality of access it offers. The foundations are as many as the gates and as the latter are associated, through the influence of Ezekiel's vision, with the twelve tribes of Israel, the former are inscribed with the names of the twelve Apostles. The materials of which the city is built suggest not only splendour and richness but an entrancing beauty of colour. We must remember here how greatly precious stones always appeal to the mind of orientals, and how keen is their colour sense. The stones mentioned are mostly those included in the breastplate of the Jewish high priest,<sup>1</sup> and we find them also mentioned in Ezekiel's description of Tyre.<sup>2</sup> The abiding significance of it all for us is that the heavenly state is one which perfectly satisfies that sense of beauty which is one of the three essential characteristics of the life of the spirit.

The greatest and most significant fact about this ideal city, however, is that it is permeated by the presence and glory of God and the Lamb. The chief feature of the earthly Jerusalem was the Temple, which was a local and material symbol of the presence of God. But in the heavenly Jerusalem there is no place set apart as specially sacred to the divine presence. God is everywhere; the city is itself a temple. And because of the radiant glory of the divine presence there is no need of the celestial luminaries of the first creation.<sup>3</sup> The place

<sup>1</sup> Exod. xxviii. 17ff.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek. xxviii. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Isa. lx. 19.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

where God dwells is a city of light and darkness cannot fall upon it. Nothing could more clearly show the spiritual character of this ideal city or suggest more strongly that heaven is the perfect realization of the presence of God in all the splendour of His power and the glory of His love.

Of this city, the gates are always open<sup>1</sup> for danger and darkness do not threaten its inhabitants. Like cities of earth whose wealth and influence have been increased by the tribute of kings and nations, this heavenly city will receive all that men can bring of those spiritual riches which constitute eternal treasure. But nothing that is unclean, no one who is evil, can enter it ; only the redeemed, whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

One feature of the city to which the angel of John's vision called his attention was the " river of water of life, bright as crystal." Here is an old symbol, familiar to us from both Old Testament and New Testament usage, for the blessings which flow to men from the presence of God. The river flows from the throne down the centre of the street and it is bordered on either side by trees of life which bear twelve different kinds of fruit, one each month, and the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations. This imagery is obviously suggested by the vision of Ezekiel,<sup>2</sup> and here John's vision ceases to be altogether concerned with the future life. With that lack of consistency which is so characteristic of these visions and so puzzling to strictly logical minds, John describes a feature of the heavenly city which suggests not only the future bliss of the redeemed but

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Isa. lx. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek. xlvi. 6-12.

## THE GREAT CONSUMMATION

also the satisfaction of souls that are athirst and lives that are sick and wounded here and now upon earth.

We need not fear some such lack of consistency in our interpretation of this vision and its message for to-day. Some expositors have said that the New Jerusalem portrayed in this vision is not to be looked for in the future but is to be found in the present. It has been taken as an ideal representation of the Christian Church which has been among us for nearly nineteen centuries, or as a picture of the perfect state of human society, which is yet to be realized on earth. We cannot accept either of these interpretations when we remember that all the indications are that the vision is intended to show the perfect consummation of the bliss of the redeemed, after the Judgment and the Resurrection. Nevertheless, the ideal city of the future is a pattern to which we must look and work in the present. Our Lord taught us to pray: "Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven." And there is a sense in which we have to seek to build the New Jerusalem here upon earth. We need the vision of the heavenly city to inspire us in our effort to build a better earthly state :

"It takes the ideal to blow a hair's breadth off  
The dust of the actual."<sup>1</sup>

In one of the greatest classics of the world's literature, Plato describes his ideal state and shows what sort of men are required to establish it and direct it. Towards the end of the *Dialogue*, Glaucon says that this city exists in idea only, not anywhere

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Book II.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

upon earth. And Socrates replies : “ In heaven there is laid up a pattern of it, which he who desires may behold, and, beholding, may set his own house in order. But whether such an one exists, or ever will exist in fact, is no matter ; for he will live after the manner of that city, having nothing to do with any other.”<sup>1</sup> The Christian, also, has his ideal city in heaven, and whether such a city is realized on earth or not, it is his business to “ live after the manner of it.” An illustration may be suggested by Dr Moffatt’s translation of the words of St Paul which the Revised Version renders “ our citizenship is in heaven ”<sup>2</sup> as “ we are a colony of heaven.” The colonist’s business is to reproduce the manners, laws and institutions of the mother-country in the land where his lot is cast.

But when all this has been said, we need to remember that the Christian point of view goes beyond that of the idealistic reformer who says :

“ I will not cease from mental fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England’s green and pleasant land.”<sup>3</sup>

As the late Dr J. H. Moulton put it in an address he gave some years ago : “ We have no sufficient grounds for believing that material progress will ever cleanse the Augean stable of this world, or even of this England, sufficiently to make it a site for the Heavenly City of our faith. . . . Beyond all other men we need to be otherworldly, heavenly-minded,

<sup>1</sup> Plato’s *Republic*, Book 9, 592 (Jowett).

<sup>2</sup> Phil. iii. 20.

<sup>3</sup> W. Blake.

## THE GREAT CONSUMMATION

our treasure laid up in the place where no moth or rust doth consume, and no demon of disillusionment breaks in to steal our life's hope. We need not fear that otherworldliness will make us less eager for the mending of this world. We fight against fleshly lusts because they 'war against the soul'—the one part of man that is meant to see the Kingdom of God and therefore is beyond any exchanging with treasures that this world can give. We strive to destroy sweating and swilling, because such environments make it so fearfully difficult for a human spirit to be made ready for service in the realm of light. . . . The Christian does not know, and knows he does not know, how long the interval that separates him from the heaven of his hope. But be the interim long or short, his daily conduct is determined by the call to live worthily of his franchise in the City of God.”<sup>1</sup>

So we come back to John's vision of the New Jerusalem and letting the picture of the gates of pearl, the jewelled foundations and the golden streets, fall out of view for the moment, we centre our thought on the words in which the prophet gathers up his impressions and reiterates the prediction to which they have given birth : “There shall be no curse any more : and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be therein : and his servants shall do him service ; and they shall see his face ; and his name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall be night no more ; and they need no light of lamp, neither light of sun ; for the Lord God shall give them light : and they shall reign for ever and ever.” All we need

<sup>1</sup> *Free Church Year Book*, 1911, pp. 49-51

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

to know is there ; everything that will appeal to the spiritually minded—the presence of God, the vision of God, the service of God and likeness to God : “ His name shall be on their foreheads.” There will be nothing to mar that bliss—“ no curse any more”—and no limit or term will be set to its enjoyment—“ they shall reign for ever and ever.” What else could be needed for the perfect satisfaction of souls created in the image and likeness of God ?

But let us remember that the ideal here presented is not only one in which we are to find our ultimate satisfaction but one in the realization of which Christ also is to find His satisfaction. The holy city, the community of the redeemed enjoying the consummation of their redemption, is the Bride of the Lamb. It is at “ the marriage supper of the Lamb ” that Christ will “ present to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing.”<sup>1</sup> Then He shall see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. So the hope of the individual Christian, the hope of the Church and the hope of the Redeemer Himself are blended into one and fixed upon the great Consummation.

“ As these white robes are soil’d and dark,  
To yonder shining ground ;  
As this pale taper’s earthly spark,  
To yonder argent round ;  
So shows my soul before the Lamb,  
My spirit before Thee :  
So in my earthly house, I am,  
To that I hope to be.

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<sup>1</sup> Eph. v. 27.

## THE GREAT CONSUMMATION

Break up the heavens, O Lord ! and far,  
Through all yon starlight keen,  
Draw me, thy bride, a glittering star,  
In raiment white and clean.

He lifts me to the golden doors,  
The flashes come and go ;  
All heaven bursts her starry floors,  
And strews her lights below,  
And deepens on and up ! the gates  
Roll back, and far within  
For me the Heavenly Bridegroom waits,  
To make me pure of sin.  
The sabbaths of Eternity  
One sabbath deep and wide—  
A light upon the shining sea—  
The Bridegroom with his bride ! ” <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tennyson, *St Agnes' Eve*.

## CHAPTER 17

### THE EPILOGUE

" Put forth thy leaf, thou lofty plane,  
    East wind and frost are safely gone ;  
With zephyr mild and balmy rain  
    The summer comes serenely on ;  
Earth, air, and sun, and skies combine  
    To promise all that's kind and fair :—  
But thou, O human heart of mine,  
    Be still, contain thyself, and bear.

December days were brief and chill,  
    The winds of March were wild and drear,  
And, nearing and receding still,  
    Spring never would, we thought, be here,  
The leaves that burst, the suns that shine,  
    Had, not the less, their certain date :—  
And thou, O human heart of mine,  
    Be still, refrain thyself, and wait."

A. H. CLOUGH.

THE series of visions, which the Book of the Revelation describes, ends with the fifth verse of the twenty-second chapter. The remainder of the book is of the nature of an epilogue and corresponds closely with the prologue found in the first chapter. It consists partly of fragments of utterances which John heard during his visionary experiences, partly of his own solemn attestations of the truth of what he has written, and probably, to a small extent, of later additions, made when the immediate crisis

## THE EPILOGUE

which called for the book had passed away and it was used as sacred Scripture to be read in the services of the Church. The blessing upon him who reads and those who hear<sup>1</sup> pronounced in the prologue and the blessing upon those who keep the words of the prophecy<sup>2</sup> in the epilogue probably belong to the latter category, as also the curse upon those who add or take away from the words of the book<sup>3</sup> and the concluding benediction. The statement of supreme importance which John made in this epilogue, as he had done in the prologue, is that which affirms, in the most solemn and impressive manner, the immediate return of Christ. This expectation has been with him all through the series of visions he has recorded. Now he remembers a command that his prophecy is not to be "sealed," like Daniel's,<sup>4</sup> as something which is to be preserved for a distant future. The crisis is at hand, so near in fact that there is no time for the change of men's characters; they must remain as they are and what they are.

To this promise of the return of Christ, the Spirit, speaking through the prophets, and the Church as a whole—already regarded as the Bride—respond "Come!" All who hear the words of the prophecy read are exhorted to repeat the cry, "Come!" And then, by a sudden turn of the thought, the invitation to come is addressed not to Christ but to those who hitherto have not known the experience of His salvation. They are pleaded with to come and take the water of life freely.

<sup>1</sup> i. 3.      <sup>2</sup> xxii. 7.      <sup>3</sup> xxii. 18 and 19.  
<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dan. viii. 26 and xii. 9.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

It is an almost bewildering change of note, for we have only just heard that it is too late for men to alter ; that the advent of Christ is so near that characters and destinies are fixed. Yet this kind of thing is characteristic of this book. The stern message of condemnation and rejection sent to Laodicea was accompanied with a gracious offer and promise : “Behold I stand at the door and knock : if any man open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me.”<sup>1</sup> The prophecy of judgment is itself a call to repentance. The last word is not with the apocalyptic, who sees the end of all things at hand, but with the evangelist, who cannot suppress the offer of grace so long as there is an ear to listen and a heart to respond. Again we see how little logic has to do with the interpretation of this book. The truths with which it deals are too great to be confined in any human formulas. They can be hinted at, suggested, indicated from different standpoints, but their perfect and harmonious reconciliation is not to be found by any cold process of intellectual argument but through the spiritual insight of a redeemed and enlightened soul.

As we close the book we have to face the fact that John’s confident prophecy of the immediate return of Christ was not fulfilled. We cannot explain it away by the method of Jewish rabbis, interpreting a day as a thousand years, or by adopting any similar device. We may say, truly enough, that there is no perspective in prophecy ; present and future are seen together without distinction. Nevertheless it is perfectly evident that John meant his readers to

<sup>1</sup> Rev. iii. 20.

## THE EPILOGUE

understand that the return of Christ was immediately at hand. His expectation was not realized. The crisis with which he and his readers were brought face to face was momentous. It is not too much to say that upon the issue of it the existence of Christianity and the future of the world depended. In that crisis the presence and power of the living, reigning Christ was indeed gloriously manifest, as it has been in other crises which have been passed since then. But such "comings" of Christ do not fulfil the prophecy of the great consummation of all things which John delivered so confidently. That has not yet taken place though nearly two thousand years have gone by since John wrote.

We must remember that the worth of any prophecy does not lie in the accuracy with which the future is forecasted, but in the insight it shows into spiritual facts and the power it has to quicken faith in eternal realities. We see that in the case of the Old Testament prophets, and it is just as true of the prophet John though he is dealing not merely with a crisis in the fortunes of a nation but with the consummation of the world's history. "If a great man interprets a national crisis so as to bring home to the nation its true ideals and destination, he remains a true prophet even if his forecast was mistaken. Without the critical situation it is probable that the great man could never have brought so much truth to such powerful expression. So an eschatology is not to be judged by a simple rule of agreement with facts, but rather by its fitness under the circumstances to quicken faith in God, to stir the conscience and put men's wills under the dominance

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

of ideal motives, to give a living sense of God and eternity.”<sup>1</sup>

To say that John was mistaken in his expectation of the immediate return of Christ does not do justice to the essential truth of his prophecy. It is the *certainty* of the return that is the real heart of his message, not the *immediacy* of it. He believed that behind all the apparent confusion of history there was a moral order which must be vindicated and that such vindication was inseparable from the triumphant manifestation of Jesus Christ as Redeemer and Lord. And that is the inspired truth that we are called upon to receive and cherish. The form in which it clothed itself for John, as for all the earliest disciples, was fashioned by Messianic and apocalyptic ideas which were part of his Jewish inheritance.<sup>2</sup> It may be that our minds are still so largely moulded by such conceptions, as they have come down to us through the ages, that even now

<sup>1</sup> Porter, *Messages of the Apocalyptic Writers*, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> A brilliant attempt has recently been made in *The Lord of Thought* (Dougall and Emmet) to show that such a use of Jewish apocalyptic ideas was not endorsed by the teaching of our Lord. The present writer, however, is not convinced that this element in the gospels is *entirely* due to those who reported that teaching. Another method of dealing with the difficulty may be indicated in the words of the late Dr Denney: “We are compelled, apparently, to recognize that in infusing into the disciples His own assurance of the final triumph of God’s cause in His own person, our Lord had to make use of representations which have turned out unequal to the truth. He had to put His sense of the absolute significance of His person for God and man into a form which was relative to the mind of the time. The eschatological Christ, coming on the clouds of heaven, and coming in the lifetime of some who heard His voice, was one expression for Jesus of this absolute significance; and it is as such an expression—that is, as an assurance of the speedy triumph of God’s cause in and through Him, and not in its spectacular detail—that we believe in it.”—*Dictionary of Christ and His Gospels*, Vol. II. p. 396.

## THE EPILOGUE

we can best express our hope and faith in the same imagery. But, if so, we should recognize the distinction between the form and the essence of the truth, and not demand from others the use of language which is a stumbling-block in their case. Difficulties arising from the literal interpretation of apocalyptic imagery "would be lessened if it were remembered that the Coming of the Lord, according to the New Testament, synchronizes with the change which is to convert flesh and blood into a spiritual and incorruptible body. It is clear from this consideration, that the final Epiphany will not be such as to appeal to our present organs of sense ; the descriptions which represent it as such cannot therefore be interpreted literally. It may indeed be that the change which will pass over us will itself be the unveiling or epiphany or advent of the hidden Christ."<sup>1</sup>

However we may conceive the final coming of Christ, and whatever mental pictures we may form of that event, the essential reality of it must be a great spiritual manifestation which will mark the overthrow of all evil and the perfect achievement of the eternal redemptive purpose of holy love. To this hope we must cling. Without it what refuge have we from darkness and despair ? We cannot believe in the worth of righteousness without believing in its final victory. We cannot believe in the reality of love without believing that at last it must be supreme. And for us righteousness and love are bound up with the person of Jesus Christ. Their final triumph must be the supreme manifestation of

<sup>1</sup> Swete, *The Ascended Christ*, p. 136.

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

His presence and power. So we must hold fast to the hope the Church has always cherished, no matter by what words or symbols we seek to express it. He must reign! He shall come! Our hearts respond eagerly to John's prayer: "Amen: come, Lord Jesus."

" Break, day of God, O break !  
The night has lingered long ;  
Our hearts with sighing wake,  
We weep for sin and wrong :  
O Bright and Morning Star draw near,  
O Sun of Righteousness, appear." <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr H. Burton.

## APPENDIX

### A NOTE ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE BOOK

WITHIN the limits of a volume of this size, it is impossible to discuss in any adequate way the complicated and difficult problem of the authorship of the Book of the Revelation. Happily, no question, either of its interpretation or of its authority, depends upon the solution of this problem. It is sufficient for all such purposes to accept the statements the Book itself contains that the name of its author was John, that he was a brother and companion in suffering of those to whom he wrote and that he belonged to the order of Christian Prophets.

It is natural, however, that we should ask if anything else is known about the writer and especially so as four other writings have come down to us in the New Testament, to which the name of John has been attached by very ancient tradition.

The first question we ask is, Was this book written by the same hand that wrote the fourth Gospel ? It is not difficult to find some points of similarity between the two books. For instance, two terms which are applied to Christ in the first chapter of the Gospel, and which are not used in the same way in the other three gospels, reappear in the Book of the Revelation—the “Word” and the “Lamb.” Nevertheless there is a marked distinction between

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

the way these words are used in the two books. In the Gospel the "Word" is used in a profoundly metaphysical sense to express the truth of the pre-existence of Christ and the mediation of Creation and Redemption through Him. In the Apocalypse the "Word of God" is the name given to Christ as Warrior-King riding in triumph from the conquest of His enemies. As regards the "Lamb," though a different Greek word is used, the idea of the expiation of sin through sacrifice is suggested in both cases, but in the Apocalypse the chief emphasis is laid upon the Lamb's power to control history and to give victory and lordship to His followers.

Such similarities as these do not imply more than the use of a certain religious vocabulary which was possessed by some group of Christians with which both works are associated. There needs to be a much closer identity of modes of speech to afford ground for argument as to a common authorship and this is lacking. Many of the most characteristic words of the Gospel do not occur in the Apocalypse at all. Moreover, the grammar and style of the Greek in which the two books are written are so different that it is extraordinarily difficult to believe that they could ever proceed from the same person, even if the widest interval were allowed between the dates at which they were written.

Such considerations, which can only be fully appreciated by close students of the original language of the books, are reinforced by others which can be recognized by the reader of any translation. The conception of God in the Apocalypse follows much more closely the lines of Old Testament thought

## A NOTE ON THE AUTHORSHIP

than that given in the Gospel. His majesty and glory are emphasized but little is said of His love and nothing of His fatherhood. Then the whole idea of the second coming of Christ and the Judgment which is the main theme of the Apocalypse is treated in a totally different way in the Gospel. There the stress is laid on the coming of the Holy Spirit in communion with whom men will discover Christ's presence and on a Judgment which is purely spiritual and automatic. In both books one can trace similar ideas but they are expressed so differently—in one case in such abstract, theoretical terms, and in the other, in such vivid, concrete, imaginative symbolism—that the suggestion that they have been developed and expressed by two entirely different types of mind is inevitable.

The second question which emerges is, Was this book written by the Apostle John? Early and widespread tradition, dating back to less than half a century from the time the book was written, asserts that it was. But this tradition also affirms that the Apostle was the author of the fourth Gospel and we have pointed out the grave difficulty of assigning both books to the same writer. This difficulty was felt as early as the middle of the third century by Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, who, in order to maintain the Johannine authorship of the Gospel denied the Apocalypse to the Apostle. But supposing, as many people think, that the Gospel was not written by John, or that it is simply the Gospel *according to St John*, reproducing the Apostle's teaching but actually compiled by some disciple of his, is it possible in that case to ascribe the Apocalypse

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

to John the son of Zebedee? There are some touches in the portrait of John given in the first three gospels which suggest that he might have been a man of such fiery zeal and stern indignation against evil as the prophet who wrote the Apocalypse appears to have been. But it would be rather remarkable if the intercourse of the Apostle with Jesus, and sixty or more years' experience of the Christian life, had wrought no change upon him. We find it easier to accept the tradition of the aged and gentle saint whose constant exhortation to his people was "Little children, love one another."

A more important consideration, however, is that the writer of the Apocalypse never claims to be an Apostle. He always calls himself a Prophet. It is perfectly clear that in the early Church the Apostles ranked first and the order of Prophets held only the second place.<sup>1</sup> Apostles might have prophetic experiences of "visions and revelations," as St Paul did, but while they could be referred to as brethren,<sup>2</sup> recognizing their fellowship with the whole community, there is no evidence anywhere that, when official position or authority was concerned, they would relinquish the higher claim of an Apostle for the lower one of a Prophet. A still more conclusive objection to the apostolic authorship, to the present writer's mind, is the fact that the human form of Jesus of Nazareth, as the Apostle knew Him in the days of His flesh, never appears in the Apocalypse. The whole conception of the glorified Christ is shaped and moulded by ideas of Jewish prophecy and apocalypse. It may be granted that in visions

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. xii. 28.      <sup>2</sup> 2 Peter iii. 15.

## A NOTE ON THE AUTHORSHIP

such figures and symbols might take a far larger place than under normal, unecstatic conditions of thought, but it is not natural to suppose that the figure of the human Jesus would be altogether suppressed. And even if that figure were absent from the visions, we should expect the Apostle at least to refer to it in those parts of the book in which he is interpreting or commenting upon his visions. In addition to this there is a considerable amount of evidence, of a cumulative character, indicating that the Apostle John died as a victim of Jewish persecution somewhere between the years 64 and 70, in which case he could not have written a book which, as our whole previous interpretation shows, springs out of a situation which only existed between the years 93 and 96.

A third suggestion is that this book adopts the device, so common to apocalyptic literature, of claiming the authority of an assumed name. For this view there is little to be said. If any name were assumed it would need to be one that was well known and carried great weight. If the book had claimed to be written by the Apostle there might be some slender ground for this suggestion, though it would be open to the objection that apocalypses were usually attributed to persons who had lived in long past ages. But there could be no reason for ascribing the book to the *Prophet* John—a person who is not heard of outside the book itself. There was no reason at all for adopting the device of pseudonymity in this case; the whole force of the appeal of this book lies in the fact that it came from one whom its readers knew personally, whose

## VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

authority they recognized and who was actually suffering from such persecution as he expected would soon overtake them.

Other suggestions that have been made are that the book was written by John Mark or by John the Elder (or Presbyter). The former suggestion need not detain us; there is no evidence to discuss. The latter is much more important but can only be briefly dealt with here. The suggestion was first made by Dionysius of Alexandria (mentioned above), who referred to a story he had heard of two tombs in Ephesus bearing the name of John and hinted that one of them might be the tomb of John the Apostle and the other the tomb of another John who wrote the Apocalypse. Eusebius of Cæsarea, who wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* early in the fourth century, quotes from some now lost writings of Papias, who was Bishop of Hierapolis two centuries earlier, a passage in which he refers to two Johns, the Apostle and the Elder, and calls them both the Lord's disciples, and he infers that if the Apocalypse is not to be assigned to the Apostle it was probably the work of the Elder. Not very long after this we find Jerome referring to a common tradition that John the Elder is the Elder referred to in the addresses of the two brief Epistles known as 2 and 3 John.

The figure of this John the Elder seems a very shadowy one and the occurrence of the word "Elder" in these two small Epistles is a slender link by which to bind him to them. If, however, this be accepted it does not help us to solve the question of the authorship of the Apocalypse. Such short Epistles do not afford much material for argument

## A NOTE ON THE AUTHORSHIP

based on linguistic grounds, but Dr Charles' very careful analysis seeks to show that they have more affinities with the first Epistle and the Gospel than with the Apocalypse, and he argues that the Gospel and all three Epistles are from John the Elder, while the Apocalypse is from the otherwise unknown John the Prophet.

Leaving aside the question of the authorship of the Gospel and Epistles, which we must not discuss here, we have not enough knowledge of the person of John the Elder to form any confident judgment as to whether he is to be identified with John the Prophet or not. John was an exceedingly common name amongst the Jews. There are five distinct Johns mentioned in the New Testament and if John the Prophet, the author of the Book of the Revelation, be a sixth, we need not be surprised or perplexed by the fact. He was one of the greatest of Jewish Christians who splendidly served his own generation under the guidance of the Spirit of God, and who, by his courage and faith, his clear insight and his glowing imagination, has made all later generations of Christians his debtors, even when they have missed much of the wealth they might have found owing to mistaken methods of interpreting his words.

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<sup>1</sup> Convenient and cheap reprints of the English translations of some of the chief Jewish apocalyptic books are published by the S.P.C.K.

# INDEX

Abaddon, 72  
Abyss, 71, 72, 138  
Adam and Eve, Life of, 89  
Additions, 157  
Adoration, 47  
Advent, Second, 41, 157-162, 165  
Alford, H., 106  
Altar, 56, 69  
Amulets, 42  
Ancient of Days, 26  
Angel of the Waters, 117  
Angels, Fallen, 71, 74, 87  
    of the Churches, 28.  
    Winds, 62.  
    Orders of, 46, 47.  
Antichrist, 22, 63, 80-82, 95, 96.  
Antipas, 38, 56.  
Apocalypse, Meaning of, 1, 5, 7.  
Apocalyptic Literature, x, 1, 7,  
    8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 57, 62, 71, 79,  
    80, 105, 120, 126, 139, 141.  
Apocalyptic teaching in Gospels,  
    58, 59, 140, 160.  
Apocrypha, 7.  
Apollyon, 72.  
Armageddon, see Har-Magedon.  
Ascension of Isaiah, 96.  
Asiarch, 17.  
Augustine, 111.  
Augustus, 16, 125.  
Authorship, 163-169.

Babylon, 109, 123, 128, 130.  
    (Rome), 109, 117, 122-  
        132.  
Balaam, 39.

Beast, The, 81, 92-96, 117, 137.  
    " heads of, 93, 124-  
        127.  
    " image of, 97, 98, 117.  
    " mark of, 97-101, 105,  
        117.  
    " worship of, see Emperor-worship.  
    The second, 97, 117, 137.  
Bibliography, 170.  
Blood of martyrs, 56, 117, 123,  
    129.  
    " sinners, 112, 136.  
    " the Lamb. See Lamb.  
    " Waters turned to, 70, 117.  
Book of Life. See Life.  
    The little, 78, 79.  
    " sealed, 49.  
Books of judgment, 142.  
Bow, 53.  
Bowls, The seven, 114-121.  
Boycott, 98.  
Bride of the Lamb, 134, 144-155,  
    157.  
Burkitt, F. C., 9, 96.

Caird, E., 6.  
Caligula, 18, 19, 20, 125.  
Candlesticks. See Lampstands.  
Celibacy, 107.  
Chaos monster, Myth of, 86, 90,  
    100, 124, 145.  
Charles, R. H., 33, 78, 105, 107,  
    113, 119, 135, 169.  
Cherubim, 26, 47, 50, 51, 53, 83,  
    115, 134.

# INDEX

- Christ, Conception of, 11, 23, 25-28, 34, 41, 49-51, 59, 87, 136, 166.  
Church as the Spiritual Israel, 14, 86.  
Churches, The seven, 25, 28, 33-43, 119.  
Claudius, 125.  
Colours, 46, 149.  
Cross, 30, 31.  
Crown. See Life.
- Dan, 63.  
Daniel, 8, 26, 87, 92, 142, 157.  
Date, ix, 21, 126, 167.  
Day of Judgment, 57, 61, 142.  
Death (Pestilence), 55.  
" and Hades, 27, 55, 142.  
" Keys of, 27.  
" The second, 42, 139, 142, 146.  
Deissmann, G. A., 99.  
Demons, 73, 74, 128.  
Denney, J., 160.  
Diadems, 93, 136.  
Dionysius, 165, 168.  
Domitian, 20, 48, 54, 96, 100, 126, 127.  
Door in heaven, 44.  
" open, 36.  
Dragon, 87-90, 93, 138. See also Satan.  
Dragon horses, 73.  
Dramatic form, 52, 67, 77, 82.
- Eagle, 71.  
Earthquakes, 57, 70, 81, 83, 116.  
Ecstasy. See Visions.  
Edom, 128.  
Egypt, Plagues of, 70.  
Elders, The four-and-twenty, 46, 50, 134.  
Emerald, 46.  
Emperor-worship, 16-21, 38, 93, 96, 101, 102, 117, 118.  
Enoch, Book of, 71, 112, 139.  
" Secrets of, 88, 139.  
Ephesus, 29, 38, 42.  
Epilogue, 156-162.
- Euphrates, 72, 95, 116, 118.  
Eusebius, 168.  
Ezekiel, 26, 45, 49, 55, 62, 78, 79, 118, 128, 141, 148, 149, 150.  
Ezra, Fourth Book of, 140.
- False Prophet. See Beast, the Second.  
Faithful and True, The, 136.  
Famine, 54.  
Feasts, 39, 40.  
Fine linen, 134.  
First-fruits, 107.  
Fornication (idolatry), 107, 123.  
Frogs, 117, 118.
- Gibbon, E., 129, 130.  
God, Conception of, 45, 47, 48, 51, 76, 83, 109, 120, 142, 150, 165.  
Gog and Magog, 141.  
Gospel, An eternal, 109.  
Guilds, 39.
- Hades. See Death and Hades.  
Hail, 117.  
Harlot, The Great. See Babylon (Rome).  
Har-Magedon, 118.  
Harps, 50.  
Harvest of the earth, 111.  
Heaven, Characteristics of, 149, 150, 154.  
Horses, Lion-headed, 73.  
Horses, The four, 53-55.  
" White, 136.  
Hosea, 58.  
Hundred and forty-four thousand, The, 63, 64, 105, 106.
- Idolatry, 40, 75, 107.  
Incense, 46, 50, 69, 116.  
Intermediate state, 57.  
Irenaeus, 100, 139.  
Isaiah, 47, 58, 109, 112, 116, 123, 128, 131, 136, 137, 145, 148, 150.

# INDEX

- Jeremiah, 42, 97, 109, 123, 128.  
Jerome, 168.  
Jerusalem, 80, 81, 147, 148.  
" The New, 144-155.  
Jews, 14, 19, 35, 36, 40.  
Jezebel, 39.  
Joel, 2, 58, 72, 111.  
Johannine writings, 163-169.  
John, The Apostle, 165, 166, 167.  
" The Elder, 168.  
" The Prophet, 2, 4, 25, 166, 169.  
Judgment, The Last, 111, 142.  
Julian, 22.  
Julius Cæsar, 16, 125.
- Keys, 27, 36.  
King of kings, 136.  
Kings, 116, 118, 137.
- Lake, K., 14.  
Lake of fire, 42, 138, 142, 146.  
Lamb, The, 23, 49-51, 64, 104, 106, 115, 164.  
" " Blood of, 50, 65, 89.  
" " Marriage of, 134, 154. See also Bride.  
Lampstands, 25, 28.  
Laodicea, 37, 43.  
Letters to the seven churches, 33-43.  
Lie, 107.  
Life, Book of, 43, 96, 142, 143, 150.  
" Crown of, 36, 42.  
" Tree of, 42, 150.  
" Water of, 146, 150, 157.  
Lightnings, voices and thunders, 47, 70, 116.  
Linen, 115, 134.  
Lion of Judah, 49.  
Literary form, 11, 77, 85, 126, 128, 135.  
Living Creatures. See Cherubim.  
Locusts, 72.  
Love, 38, 41.  
Lukewarmness, 37, 38, 41.
- Magic, 42, 98.  
Manna, 42.  
Marcus the Valentinian, 100.  
Martyrs, 36, 38, 56, 57, 65, 82, 89, 97, 107, 108, 111, 139, 140.  
Measuring, 80.  
Meat consecrated to idols, 39.  
Message for to-day, ix, 12, 22, 23, 30-32, 59, 60, 75, 90, 91, 102, 103, 108, 130-132, 151-153.  
Michael, 88, 89.  
Millennium, 105, 106, 139-141.  
Morning star, 42.  
Moses, Song of, 115.  
Moulton, J. H., 152, 153.  
Mountain, Burning, 70.  
Mystery, 123.  
Mythology, 86, 90, 100.
- Nahum, 123.  
Names, Inscribing of, 43, 154.  
" of blasphemy, 93.  
" Power of, 43.  
" Secret, 42, 43, 136.  
Nero, 18, 56, 99.  
" Myth of return of, 54, 94, 95, 99, 127, 137.  
New heaven and earth, 145.  
Nicolaitans, 39.  
Nineveh, 123.  
Number of the Beast, 99-101.  
Numbers, Symbolism of, 28, 29, 89, 100, 141.
- Oil and wine, 54.  
Overcoming, 42, 65.
- Papacy, 60, 102, 131.  
Papias, 168.  
Parthians, 53, 54, 73, 94, 116, 118, 127, 137.  
Pastoral responsibility, 34.  
Patmos, 5, 24, 70, 92.  
Pergamum, 17, 38, 42.  
Persecution, 5, 14, 20, 24, 29, 36, 37, 41, 56, 82, 88, 96, 98, 110.  
Pestilence, 55

# INDEX

- Philadelphia, 35, 36, 43.  
Pillar, 43.  
Plagues, 70, 116, 128.  
Plato, 152.  
Porter, F. C., 160.  
Pratt, J. B., 85.  
Prayers of saints, 46, 69.  
Priesthood, Imperial, 17, 98.  
    Jewish, 47.  
Prologue, 2, 156, 157.  
Prophecy, 2-4, 21, 120, 159.  
Prophets, 2-4, 12, 25, 163, 166.  
Prophet, The False. See Beast,  
    the Second.  
Provincial administration, 17,  
    97.  
Pseudonymity, 10, 167.  
Psychology, x, 85, 104, 128, 135,  
    137.
- Quotations from lost apoc-  
    alypses, 9, 62, 79, 126.
- Ramsay, W. M., 28, 33, 54.  
Reign of Saints, 140.  
Repentance, Call to, 37, 158.  
Resurrection body, 43, 57, 140.  
Resurrection, First, 82, 108, 111,  
    139-141.  
Revolution, 54.  
Rome, City of, 16, 116, 117, 124,  
    127, 129.  
    Empire of, 15, 21, 93, 96,  
    117, 130.  
    Religion of, 15.
- Sanday, W., 59.  
Sardis, 37, 43, 119.  
Satan, 87, 101, 141. See also  
    Dragon.  
    Deep things of, 40.  
    Synagogue of, 35.  
    Throne of, 17.  
Sea, 142, 145.  
    of glass, 47, 114.  
Sealing, 62, 105.  
    prophecy, 157.
- Seals, The seven, 52-60.  
Sibylline Oracles, 94, 95, 100.  
Silence in heaven, 69.  
Smith, G. A., 130, 131.  
Smyrna, 16, 35, 42.  
Solomon, Psalms of, 63.  
Songs, 48, 50, 64, 83, 106, 114,  
    134.  
Son of man, 26, 113.  
Souls under the altar, 56.  
Spirits, The seven, 47.  
Stars, Falling, 57, 70, 71, 87.  
    The seven, 27, 28.  
Star, The morning, 42.  
Stones, Precious, 46, 149.  
Stone, White, 42.  
Supper of God, 137.  
Swete, H. B., 100, 161.  
Sword, Two-edged, 26, 136.  
Symbolism, 6, 7, 28, 68, 141,  
    147.
- Tabernacle, 25.  
Temple of Jerusalem, 80, 149.  
    in heaven, 83, 113, 115,  
    116.  
Testimony of Jesus, 90, 134.  
Throne of God, 45, 142.  
Thrones of elders, 46.  
    ", martyrs, 139.  
Thunders, The seven, 78.  
Thyatira, 39, 42.  
Tiberius, 18, 125.  
Trumpets, The seven, 67-76.  
Tyre, 123, 128, 149.
- Unclean spirits, Three, 117, 118.
- Vaughan, C. J., 59.  
Vespasian, 18, 125.  
Victors, Reward of, 42, 65.  
Vintage of the earth, 111.  
Virgins, 106.  
Visions, x, 5, 8, 25, 44, 64, 77, 84,  
    114, 127, 135.  
Voices, 25, 27, 44, 82, 89, 116.

## INDEX

War, 53, 116, 118, 141.  
,, in heaven, 87, 88.  
Warrior-King, 31, 136, 164.  
Watchfulness, 119.  
Wells, H. G., 30.  
White, Significance of, 43, 53, 65,  
  136.  
Winds, 62.  
Wine, 54.  
Witnesses, The two, 80.

Woman arrayed with sun, 86-90.  
  The scarlet, 122-132.  
Word of God, 136, 164.  
Wormwood, 70.  
Wrath of God, 116, 120, 137.  
  
Zealots, 80.  
Zechariah, 25, 53, 80.  
Zion, Mount, 104.





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